Living safe with an open heart

A story for those who put others first

To help you see manipulation, trust your gut,
and protect your heart without walling it off.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

This is for you 1

It's not your fault 1

Disclaimer and safety note 2

PART I. SLIPPING UNDER YOUR RADAR 3

1. I don't know! 4

The emotional trojan horse 6

2. He really knew how to make me feel special 8

Idealization – a bond or a leash 10

PART II. STEALING YOUR REALITY 12

3. I was so mean... What is wrong with me? 13

DARVO – the innocent victim with claws 15

4. Why are you so sensitive 17

Minimization – when a wound is always just a scratch 19

5. Look at the weather 20

Diversion – the art of saying everything and nothing at once 22

6. Everyone has their story 23

Justification – there's always a bigger excuse 24

7. But not all of them are true 25

Lying – when truth is seen as a weakness 27

PART III. CRUSHING YOUR SENSE OF WORTH 28

8. How can you be so ungrateful? 29

Guilt tripping – when kindness comes with an expensive bill 30

9. You are such a [insert label] 31

Humiliation – when contempt wears a smile 32

10. I loved those moments. They made me feel... Warm. Fuzzy. Even dizzy at times. 34

Trauma bonding – when love becomes a nasty addiction 35

11. It's like they smell where it hurts 37

Slow erosion – the quiet death of self 38

12. It would be a shame if I had to hurt you 40

Intimidation – weaponizing your survival instinct against you 43

PART IV. CLOSING THE WALLS IN ON YOU 45
13. It was like something took away their trust 46
Isolation – when one person becomes your whole world 47
14. I thought there was no way out 50
Structural control – when you stop belonging and start being owned 51

PART V. THROWING YOU AWAY 53
15. I felt like some kind of ghost 54
Discard – “I don’t want to play with you anymore” 55
16. I can change 57
Hoovering – here we go again 61

PART VI. IT DOESN’T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY 62
17. If you believed in yourself, the world would be a better place 63

Building strong and meaningful connections 67
Fight for humanity 70
Thank you 70
Gut feeling checklist: the manipulation playbook decoded 71

Glossary 76
List of sources 78

This is for you

How would you feel if every time you tried to be yourself, someone called it a problem, and then hid behind “it was just a joke”?

If every time you spoke up, you were called too sensitive?

If simply saying “no” made you feel guilty?

If people you once trusted suddenly became distant without an explanation?

If you were slowly beginning to lose your sanity and the hope, there was a way out of it all?

Even if your gut kept whispering something was wrong… would you be able to put a finger on it?

This book is for everyone who put others before yourselves and think there might be something wrong with you. I hope a day comes when you believe the problem is neither you nor your care. Empathy is a superpower; you just have to share it with those who actually deserve it, the ones who you can always say “no” to without feeling an ounce of guilt.

But first and foremost, I dedicate this book to the warmest human being I’ve ever known. You taught me the value of saying “no” and of being careful who to trust. I hope you never give up the fight. And I hope we get to fist bump again.

It’s not your fault

The stories in this book are heavy because they reveal how emotional manipulation and abuse actually work. They show how caring people can be made to doubt themselves in ways that feel invisible from the outside.

Abuse doesn’t always come with shouting or bruises. It can hide in laughter, in silence, or in the smallest daily exchanges. It can happen anywhere – at work, at home, among friends – and it can be done by anyone, regardless of age, gender, or background. What all forms of abuse share is a lack of genuine empathy and an obsession with control.

If you’ve lived through something like this, please know this is a pattern. It’s not your fault. Manipulation is designed to slip past your defences unnoticed.

And if you know someone who blames themselves, carries guilt and shame, or seems cut off from everyone except the person controlling them, please don’t give up on them, even if they try to push you away. Make it clear you’re there for them if they need you.

Disclaimer and safety note

This book is for educational and reflective purposes only. It is not therapy, psychological diagnosis, medical advice, legal advice, or a substitute for professional support.

The author is not a psychologist. The stories are fictional, and any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The names were chosen from common names in the author's country, with preference given to those suitable for international use.

This book translates complex emotional and behavioural patterns into a story format. The framework it draws on was inspired by the works of Durvasula (2024), Morningstar (2019), Thomas (2016), and MacKenzie (2015), with additional sources listed at the end.

This book discusses emotional abuse, manipulation, coercive control, intimidation, trauma bonding, isolation, threats, and recovery. Please read at your own pace.

If you are in immediate danger, contact local emergency services. If you are experiencing abuse, consider reaching out to a trusted person, crisis line, domestic violence or abuse support organization, therapist, lawyer, or other qualified professional.

Laws around recording, evidence, restraining orders, and reporting differ by location. Check the rules where you live and prioritize your safety.

PART I. SLIPPING UNDER YOUR RADAR

1. I don't know!

The café door chimed, and Mary's voice carried across the room. "HEEEY!"

She waved – a long, sweeping motion that drew a few glances from nearby tables. Her other hand came up to grab her own shoulder as she made her way through the crowd, half-grinning, half-apologetic.

Anna lifted her hand in a small, shy wave, then let it fall back to the table. Her eyes met Mary's only for a second.

"It's been so long!" Mary said, still catching her breath as she stopped by the table. "What, a year already? God, I'm the worst at staying in touch. Sorry I didn't call. Like, at all.." She laughed quietly, hoping Anna would laugh too.

Anna's lips moved into a polite smile. "Hey..."

Mary pulled out a chair and sat down. "I'm really happy to see you. Thanks for coming. I've got so much to tell you."

Anna nodded, eyes drifting toward the window. The clatter of cups and the low hum of conversation filled the pause between them.

Mary opened the menu, eyes scanning the list without really reading. "So... how've you been? Still at that old job, or did you finally run away from it?"

Anna's shoulders moved in the faintest shrug. "Still there."

"Ah, classic." Mary gave a small laugh that faded quickly. She glanced up, waiting for Anna's smile to meet hers, but it never came.

Anna's gaze stayed fixed somewhere past the window – steady, unfocused. Her fingers traced the rim of her glass in slow circles.

The café sounds seemed to thin around them – chatter dimming, the clatter of dishes blurring into background noise.

Mary's hand stilled on the table. For a moment, neither of them spoke. "Anna..." she said quietly, leaning a little forward. "You seem kind of... not you."

Anna blinked, and her fingers tightened around the glass. "Erm, what? I'm fine." She gave a quick nod, eyes still low. "You said you've got a lot to tell, right?"

A server passed by, and Mary raised her hand slightly. "Just an orange juice, please." She hesitated, then smiled faintly – polite, unsure.

Anna's fingers were still wrapped around her glass. She hadn't taken a sip.

When the server left, Mary leaned in a little, elbows resting on the table's edge but keeping her distance. "Hey... my shenanigans can wait, you know. If there's something you want to get off your chest, I'm here to listen."

Anna gave a small shake of her head. “Oh, nothing… Really. I don’t want to bother you with my stuff.”

Mary thanked the server as the drinks arrived, then she looked back at Anna. “You’re not bothering me,” she said softly.

Anna stirred her drink once, twice, eyes fixed on the spoon. “You said something about shenanigans, right? So, what happened?”

Mary’s smile thinned. “Anna… If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s completely OK. But please don’t say it’s nothing. It feels like something’s weighing you down. If you want to talk, I’ll listen.”

Anna’s spoon clinked softly against the glass. She kept stirring long after the sugar had dissolved.

“Anna?” Mary said again, barely above the hum of the café.

Anna stopped stirring. Her hand stayed on the spoon, motionless. “He…” Her voice was thin, unsteady. “My boyfr…” She blinked hard, eyes glistening. “He left…” The words came out small, almost swallowed. “He left me.”

“When?”

“Four months.” Anna’s lips trembled.

Mary looked down. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t there for you. I should have…”

“What are you sorry for?” Anna’s voice rose suddenly, sharp enough to turn a few heads. “It’s not your fault. It doesn’t even matter. I’m such a nagging idiot! I don’t even know how a girl like me could get a boy like Luke. Of course I blew it!”

Her eyes darted around the café as whispers and glances spread. She pressed her palms to her face, voice dropping to a whisper.

“I’m a crybaby. I’m mean. I’m ugly. I had a perfect boyfriend. I wanted to be better. Of course I didn’t. I can’t.” Her fingers tightened around her hair. “It was perfect, and it’s gone. I’m never getting it back.”

“Why are you even friends with me? I’m not fun, I’m bad at sports. Just… I don’t know, maybe you should leave me alone. Sorry. No, forget it… I’ll go. Bye.” She pushed back from the table, chair legs scraping against the floor. She grabbed her bag, eyes fixed on the exit.

“Wait… please sit down.”

Mary’s hand lifted halfway, then fell back to the table. She covered her mouth with both palms, exhaled sharply through her nose, and looked up at the ceiling. Her face flushed bright red. “Uuugh, why is it so hard to say?” She shook her head, drew a breath, and looked at Anna. “OK.”

Anna froze, still half-standing.

“Anna, I think you’re a great person,” Mary said, voice steadier now. “You really care. Most of my friends call me only when they need something. But you used to call just to ask how I was. Just because. It always cheered me up.”

Anna’s eyes flickered.

Mary went on. “Then I moved away, and you got that boyfriend, and… I kind of forgot about you. I wasn’t a good friend. I’m embarrassed about that. But I want to be better.” She hesitated, words gathering again. “May I ask something? You seem to be really hard on yourself. Why?”

Anna’s shoulders lowered. She stood still for a moment, then pulled the chair back and sat down again. Her breathing slowed. When she spoke, her voice was flat, almost toneless. “I’m not hard on myself. That’s what I am.”

Mary’s brow furrowed. “But… why?”

Anna looked up at her briefly, then away. “Because that’s what I am.”

Mary’s mouth opened slightly, but no words came out. She just watched Anna, eyes searching her face.

Anna’s lips pressed together. For a few seconds, neither moved.

Then Mary spoke, her voice louder, sharper: “Anna… why?”

Anna looked up at Mary and froze. Her wide eyes were like windows into her soul. A single strand of hair spilled over one eye like a waterfall. She was completely silent, yet her face was quietly screaming:

“I DON’T KNOW!”

The emotional trojan horse

Have you ever met someone where something just **doesn’t add up**? They’re beautiful, genuinely warm, smart… yet they constantly blame themselves and avoid interaction. Sure, it could be just “stress”. But it can also signal they’ve been a target of emotional abuse.

Emotional abusers care mainly about themselves and only show empathy when it makes them look better. To them, others aren’t individuals with needs, wants, dreams, and burdens – but pawns in a game of chasing wealth, fame, pleasure, power, or any other ego boost. They don’t really care if that means hurting others.

You probably know this mindset: “*If I do something for you, I expect something back. If you don’t bring value to me, why should I bother with you?*” It sounds normal, right? Fair, even. Of course every relationship needs balance. But that same **transactional mindset** – the one that’s become completely ordinary – Is also how emotional manipulators think. Their version just goes a bit further: “*How do I need to appear to get what I want from others?”* They’re

experts at reading social cues and bending them to their advantage. Fake charm, fake vulnerability, virtue signalling – whatever earns trust or admiration, they'll use it.

At the same time, most people aren't great at handling someone else's pain. When a friend is struggling, we often joke, change the topic, or say something like "*oh, cheer up, others have problems as well.*" Not because we don't care, but because real emotion makes us uncomfortable. Now look at the **connection mindset**: "*I don't keep score. If I care about you, I'm there – not because I expect something back, but because that's what connection means.*" That kind of genuine presence has become so rare that vulnerability almost looks strange. It's a double whammy: abuse hides in plain sight, and help is hard to find.

The aim of this book is to translate how emotional abuse works into an easy-to-read story format with explanations. And if I were to explain the strategy emotional abusers use, with one phrase, it would be: **Trojan horse**.

First, they hide behind a performative mask to bypass the target's defences. Then they attack from within, eroding the target's self-worth. A person with low self-worth takes all the blame on themselves. The inner voice might sound like this: "*They understand me better than anyone, so if they get upset, they must see something I don't. I know I can be difficult sometimes. They just want me to do better, and they're probably right. If I can work on myself, we'll get back to how good things were.*" With this mindset, **boundaries** collapse, which lets the manipulator do whatever they please. And once they extract what they want, they discard the target and move on.

For example, a man might charm a woman, make her dependent on his approval, and then leave her when she's too old for his liking. Another example: a woman might act vulnerable to gain sympathy from a friend, undermine them with "innocent" jokes to keep them off balance, and destroy their social circle when they began to stand up for themselves.

There are countless manipulation tactics, designed to make you feel crazy. But you're not. It's just that if you care deeply about others, you are more vulnerable because you are more likely to blame yourself rather than them. But there is **hope**: there is an underlying logic to abuse. Understand it, and you can recognize it in the moment, protect yourself from manipulators, and still live with an **open heart**.

Let's fight back with the one thing manipulators exploit but often lack genuine access to: **empathy**. This book translates that logic into stories that put you in the target's shoes and show why they are not "crazy". People who care make the world a better place and deserve better. Let's untangle this emotional trojan horse, so no one will be able to manipulate you ever again – be it at work, in family, your circle of friends or in your romantic relationship.

2. He really knew how to make me feel special

A spoon clattered onto a tray somewhere behind them.

Mary rolled the paper straw between her fingers, eyes drifting across the table before she spoke. “Anna. May I ask you something about this ex… this boyfriend of yours?”

Anna’s shoulders sagged. She looked down at the table, tracing a faint piece of sugar with her thumb. “Yeah… sure. Ask. Doesn’t matter.”

Mary rested her chin on her hand. “You said he was perfect, right?”

Anna blinked slowly. “Yeah… really good guy, you know. Really good.” Her voice was quiet, hesitant. “Why?”

“And you trusted him?”

A small, puzzled smile crossed her lips. “If you don’t trust your boyfriend, who do you even trust?”

Mary tilted her head. “Yeah, but why did you trust him? I mean… if it’s OK, could you tell me how you two met? What made him so great?”

Anna’s gaze drifted to the side, somewhere far past the window. “We met at a bar.” Her words came slowly at first. “He gave me some stupid compliment. Oh man…” A faint laugh escaped her, short and genuine. Then she paused. Her eyes grew dreamy. “He really knew how to make me feel special.”

She moved in her chair. “He always said I was good at understanding him. That I was kind, beautiful… that I should never change, that I’m perfect. You know, the opposite of those guys that want to fix you.”

Her eyes unfocused a little. “One time, I dreamed we were in a field of flowers – bright yellow everywhere – and that same day he brought me a bouquet. Not just any bouquet. It was like staring into the sun. God, it smelled so strong it almost made me dizzy.” She smiled softly. “How did he even know?”

She paused, hands resting loosely in her lap. “Another time he surprised me with a spa trip. I’d never even told him how much I needed that. He just… knew. He always knew. We were soulmates, I tell you.”

Her voice grew a touch lighter. “He’d call me constantly. We could talk for hours about nothing. Work, TV, stupid stuff. He even took time off just to see me. He said I was the only one who really got him.”

She trailed off, staring at nothing for a few seconds, as though she could still hear him.

Mary leaned her chin to one side. “And what made him happy?”

“Oh, he was such a bubbly guy.” Anna’s face softened, and more lightness crept into her voice. “He loved when I listened to his stories – those crazy hikes, cycling trips, all that. When I hugged him, he’d always say he loved me so much.”

Her eyes brightened. “Anytime I told him something personal… something I was embarrassed about… you know how guys usually joke? Not him. He’d look at me like I was the only person in the world. Said he felt special that I trusted him. His gaze… oh my god, his gaze! He’d look so proud. Or when I complimented him, he’d light up like a Christmas tree and kiss me.”

She laughed. Soft and breathy, almost childlike. “See? Not like the others. We were the same. Same music, same movies, same food, same sports, even the same stupid shows. Well, maybe not every sport, but…” Her hands fluttered midair, painting invisible pictures. “It felt like everything just… matched.”

She leaned back, her smile wide and unfocused. “Sometimes, we even had the same dreams. Not exactly the same-same, but close enough that it felt… I don’t know. Magical. And we talked about everything – kids, future plans, all of it. It felt endless, like there was nothing we couldn’t share.”

The light from the café window caught her face as she looked past Mary, eyes far away. For a moment, she wasn’t there at all.

Mary spoke softly. “It sure sounds nice. But… did he ever do anything pushy?”

Anna laughed, a small, breathy sound. “Pushy? Oh, no. He was just… a cuddly bear. You know, touchy. Always wanted to hug, kiss, hold hands, all that.” She smiled, then hesitated. “Maybe a bit too much sometimes. But that’s just him. Cuddly wubbly bear.” Her voice cracked on the nickname, and she looked down for a moment.

“Well, okay… maybe he did have a few annoying things. But who doesn’t?” Her smile flickered. “Once he wanted to see some texts on my phone. I didn’t show him, and he got annoyed. He said I didn’t trust him.” A nervous laugh. “That hurt me, actually. But I guess he just cared, right?”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Sometimes he’d call really late. Like, middle of the night late. And if I didn’t answer, he’d get upset. Said he was worried. Or that I didn’t love him enough. He’d sound so sad on the phone.”

Her hands clasped together on the table. “The most annoying was when I needed time alone. He couldn’t stand it. Said it hurt him. That I was pushing him away.” She looked at Mary quickly and then away again. “That’s stupid, right? Wanting space doesn’t mean you don’t love someone.” She tried to laugh, but it came out thin. “It felt awful saying no to him. He’d look so hurt. It was just… ugh. But you take the bad with the good, right? Nobody’s perfect.”

A chair scraped across the floor somewhere behind them, and a short burst of laughter rose from another table before fading again.

Mary's voice was soft. "How hard is it for you to talk about this stuff?"

Anna's fingers found her forearm and rubbed it slowly, back and forth. Her gaze wandered across the table, then settled on nothing in particular. "Hard..." She looked at the floor with a kind smile. "Thank you, Mary. I can feel you really care. You listen so attentively."

Her shoulders eased a little. "It's strange. It is a bit painful. But it also makes me feel... lighter. You don't judge..." She looked at Mary with squinted eyes. "I mean, you won't judge me or anything?"

Mary smiled, lips curving gently. "If I ever do, you can hit me in the face with a frying pan."

Anna's laugh came out shaky but genuine.

Mary leaned back, lips pressed together, hand scratching her head. Then she smiled lightly. "I'd love to keep talking, but I've got to grab something to eat. I haven't eaten for hours, and I feel like I'm about to pass out. Maybe we can meet again soon? There's something I'd like to show you... I've been reading something lately. Just some psychology stuff. I know I'm not a psychologist, but... That book really helped me see some things from a different perspective. Is it OK if we meet again and I bring it with me?"

Anna's eyes lit up. "Oh, psychology! That's so nostalgic! Remember the finals from high school? Good times... Sure, that's an interesting idea! And yeah, I know you're not a psychologist. It doesn't matter to me."

"OK, got to go now, but let's see each other as soon as possible. Got time on Wednesday?"

"Yeah, sure! And... Mary... Thank you. For listening. For being so patient with me."

"Hey, that's what friends are for, right? Really got to go now, but I'll see you Wednesday. Let's confirm the hour later."

"Wednesday, yeah... see you." She watched Mary push back her chair and head toward the counter. Mary reached for her wallet, but the server stopped her with a gentle hand and nodded toward Anna. Mary smiled, shook her head, and waved goodbye.

Idealization – a bond or a leash

Who doesn't like to feel special? Making someone feel special is beautiful – unless it starts feeling like you have to keep earning it. That's when it stops being love and crosses into manipulation. How to see the difference? Ask yourself how easy it is to say "no." If even picturing it makes you tense up, that's a sign to tap the brakes on trust and take a closer look. Do any of these behaviours sound familiar?

1. Love bombing (Fischer, 2024): Have you ever been flooded with compliments, affection, or gifts – so much it felt dizzying? That might be love bombing. Affection itself isn't the issue. The key is whether it's grounded and specific ("*I like how you explained that idea, it was so clear*") or vague and overblown ("*You're perfect*"). Genuine affection makes you feel seen and free, with no pressure attached. Love bombing is excessive, fast, and vague – a tactic to lower your

guard and gain control. How to tell them apart? Ask yourself: does their affection make you feel safe to be yourself, or pressured to keep earning it?

2. Mirroring (Drescher, 2024a): Have you ever felt someone else is the same as you? They have a similar body language, interests, attitudes… Almost like you've found a soulmate overnight or at least someone eerily similar in values and outlook on life. Mirroring is a natural human behaviour that helps us create connection. What separates the two is in how it unfolds: healthy mirroring happens gradually, feels steady, and deepens trust over time. Manipulative mirroring is fast, intense, and almost too perfect – it pushes you to open up quickly and later uses what you've shared against you.

3. Positive reinforcement (Nickerson, 2024): Have you ever trained a dog? You say "sit," the dog obeys, you give a treat. Soon it learns: "obedience = reward." That's positive reinforcement. With people, the difference between training and genuine praise lies in the pattern. If compliments appear only when you act a certain way – and vanish or turn cold when you don't – that's training. Only if praise comes naturally, even when you're not performing, and doesn't make you feel pressured to earn it, that's genuine.

4. Future faking (Lee, 2024a): Has anyone promised you life-changing things (marriage, kids, promotions, being besties for life) yet the promises always stayed far off and never fully materialized? That's future faking: painting a perfect future that mostly remains a fantasy. At best, you'll get *breadcrumbs* – small gestures or token steps that look like progress but never add up. It's like a carrot dangled just close enough to keep you chasing. The difference between genuine plans and future faking is follow-through. Genuine plans come with concrete steps, accountability, and steady progress. Future faking keeps you waiting with distant promises and just enough breadcrumbs to stop you from walking away.

5. Boundary pushing (Burn, 2022): Have you ever felt someone was moving things along faster than you were comfortable with? Maybe they pushed for physical closeness too soon, expected your trust before earning it, or kept nudging you into little compromises until saying "no" felt harder and harder. That's boundary pushing: testing your comfort zone bit by bit. First it's "*just a touch*," then it's "*just a hug*." Each little push makes the next one harder to refuse. The healthy alternative is respect. Ask yourself: do they listen when you set limits, or do they keep testing how far they can go?

Authentic connection needs trust. But trust is only safe when it grows slowly, with real *vulnerability* on both sides. If someone wins your trust with fantasies or half-truths, chances are they just want you invested enough to ignore the red flags. Nobody's perfect, sure – but the bare minimum is being able to say "no" without guilt. If you can't do that, or if every boundary gets pushback, be careful. That kind of trust can turn against you fast, and the cost is usually heavier than you think: taking the bad with the good until the bad quietly takes over. The perfect bond could actually be a leash in disguise. Trust is the first thing manipulators target. Protect it. Don't give it to anyone who hasn't earned it.

PART II. STEALING YOUR REALITY

3. I was so mean… What is wrong with me?

The café looked the same as last time – soft light through the window, low hum of conversation, the smell of coffee lingering in the air.

“HEEEY!” Mary waved from the entrance, smiling as she made her way over.

“Hi.” Anna’s smile was small but genuine.

“So, here’s that book.” Mary placed it on the table, sliding into her seat. “I hope I’m not being too geeky or anything?” She studied Anna’s face, searching for how she was really doing.

“Geeky? Maybe.” Anna smirked faintly. “But who cares? We were *the* psychology geeks in high school, weren’t we?”

Mary laughed. “Right. I almost forgot how seriously we took that.”

Anna leaned down, searching through her backpack. “Speaking of serious… look what I brought.” She pulled out a small blue booklet and held it up proudly. “My diary! Well, sort of. My memory’s terrible lately, so I thought this might help me remember things.”

Mary blinked, caught off guard. “A diary? Anna, wow, that’s…” She hesitated. “Isn’t that a bit… personal?”

Anna hesitated for a heartbeat, then shrugged, smiling nervously. “Yeah, I know. I thought about it a lot. But… we’ve known each other forever. You never hurt me. That one year we didn’t talk… that’s nothing. I always felt calm with you.” Her voice softened. “Last time, after we talked, I felt *so* much better. Like I could actually breathe again. I feel I can trust you.”

She reached back into the bag and pulled out a small frying pan, tapping it against her palm with a grin. “And besides, I’ve got my protection ready.”

Mary rolled her eyes, laughing. “You really brought that? Fine. We’ll make pancakes later.”

Anna laughed too, the tension in her shoulders easing just a little.

“So,” Mary said, opening the book and sliding on her glasses, “this thing has some really deep questions. If it ever feels like too much, tell me, okay? They can get heavy.”

Anna nodded. “Sure. I’m ready.”

Mary noticed her nodding – a little distant, but still happy. “And Anna… it’s nice to see you in good spirits. Did something happen over the weekend?”

“Uh? No.” Anna looked away for a moment. “I just… I guess it’s nice if you have someone who treats you with respect.”

Mary tilted her head. “Like your ex?”

A quick blush rose to Anna’s cheeks. “Eh… just open the book. Bring forth the questions!”

Mary chuckled. “Right.” She searched for a page marked with a yellow tab. “Here’s one that might be interesting,” she said gently. “Have you ever felt confused in your relationship? Like… you know something happened, but your boyfriend denied it? Or maybe he made you feel like you were the bad one?”

Anna’s brow furrowed. “Confused… feel bad…” She tapped her finger on the table, thinking. “Maybe. Wait, I think I wrote something about that.”

She flipped through her diary, pages rustling softly. “Aha. This one.” Her eyes narrowed as she read. “Damn, that was unpleasant.” She cleared her throat. “So… there was this one time when he touched my chest out of nowhere. I told him not to, and he said he didn’t touch me. I’ve got it written down.”

Mary said nothing.

Anna turned the book toward herself, eyes scanning the page, and began reading aloud, her voice steady at first.

“‘Hey, come on, please be more careful and don’t touch my chest.’
‘Babe, what? I didn’t touch you there. My hand was on your shoulder. Why are you upset?’
‘No, it was lower than that, it…’
‘Wait, seriously? I was just trying to hold you. You really think I’d do that to you? That hurts, you know? Who do you think I am? Why don’t you trust me?’
‘Oh… sorry, I didn’t mean…’
‘No, it’s fine, it’s just… I wish you’d stop seeing the worst in me. I was just trying to be close, and now you’re making me feel like a creep. Do you have any idea how that feels?’
‘I didn’t mean to overreact…’
‘I just wanted a moment with you, and now I feel like I did something terrible. It hurts that you don’t trust me. Maybe you should talk about those things in therapy.’
‘Sorry…’”

Anna’s voice softened on the last line, almost disappearing.

Mary’s voice was gentle. “Anna, how did that make you feel?”

For a long moment, Anna didn’t move. She stared at the diary, eyes glassy, fingers resting on the page. “It was…” She blinked slowly. “Yeah… I cried. I felt so confused. Why did I overreact like that?” Her voice thinned, trembling. “I felt like a complete wreck after that.”

Her lips parted again, and the words slipped out before she could stop them. “I was so mean to my boyfriend. What is wrong with me?”

Mary’s expression tightened, and Anna’s shoulders curved inward.

“But… your chest,” Mary said softly. “Did he touch you?”

Anna frowned, lost in thought. “I don’t have that part written down. So I don’t know for sure. I have this faint memory – his palm on my chest, and him looking me in the eyes while he did it.

But it's so foggy. I'm not sure it happened." She rubbed her arm slowly. "I must've been drunk or something… I don't know. I just felt like a wreck. Yeah… sometimes I can really be one crazy psycho."

Mary's head shook almost imperceptibly.

Anna mirrored the gesture, forcing a small laugh. "Yep, I know. I am…"

"No." The word came sharper than Mary intended. "I don't…" She caught herself, exhaled, then pressed her hands together. "Aaargh, it's not you." She breathed again, voice calmer. "Anna, you're one of the kindest people I know. Please don't say that."

Anna didn't answer.

Mary steadied her tone. "Let's just… Are you OK if we go to the next question?"

Anna nodded faintly. "Sure."

DARVO – the innocent victim with claws

Have you ever told yourself: "*I'm mean, ugly, boring. Bad at driving, bad at sports. A useless friend, partner, or employee*." In short: that you're the problem? Or do you know someone who thinks like this? If it feels safe, try a short exercise. Hold that belief for a moment. Why do you believe it? What proof do you have? Now ask yourself this: has anyone ever denied your reality – leaving you sure something happened, only to feel foggy about it later?

Now try this thought experiment. You are a general defending your world. One soldier alone knows how to launch the weapon that will stop the invading army, but this soldier refuses to kill. If they do not obey, your world collapses. What would you do? What strategy would you use? The harsh truth is that you would feel you had no choice but to break the soldier's will. Is it even possible to break someone's free will?

Unfortunately, it is possible, and emotional manipulators do it to control others. Imagine a boss criticizing an employee. If the employee already believes they are useless, they won't defend themselves. They will either give up or exhaust themselves trying to prove their worth, even if their work was perfectly fine. That is the effect of **devaluation**: it erodes self-worth until the question is no longer "*Am I OK with this?*" but "*Am I worthy?*" Worthy of love, belonging, a salary. Your worth becomes locked behind someone else's approval.

Emotional manipulators often appear completely normal on the surface. But beneath that façade lies deep insecurity, fragile self-worth, a compulsive need for control and validation, and a chronic lack of genuine empathy. They are (Telloian, 2024):

- Grandiose narcissists, who project charisma and confidence to assert superiority.
- Covert narcissists, who gain control through self-pity and guilt-tripping.
- Communal narcissists, who craft an image of moral virtue and manipulate by labelling dissent as immoral.

- Antagonistic narcissists, who turn every interaction into rivalry or conflict.
- Malignant narcissists, who seek validation through domination, fear, and cruelty.

There are also psychopaths, who are emotionally cold and may take pleasure in others' suffering, and sociopaths, who are more impulsive and actively inflict harm to regain control or assert dominance.

Their ego is so fragile that the smallest resistance feels like destruction. To them, you not submitting equals you attacking them. They HAVE to erode your self-worth, so you stop resisting with your free will and start depending on their approval. They HAVE to make you submit, because for them control isn't optional. It's survival. That's why they're obsessed with image. It helps them reframe the reality and achieve their version of freedom. And they don't see freedom as "*no one dominating me,"* but as "*me dominating others*."

This mindset is especially clear in one of their favourite tactics: DARVO. It's a form of gaslighting, a way of bending reality so you doubt yourself. **Gaslighting** (Raypole & Silva, 2024) works by making you question your memory and sense of self. If an event feels foggy in your mind, the problem may not be your memory at all, but that someone has tampered with your reality because it did not suit them.

DARVO (Fleming, 2023) follows a simple pattern:

- Deny: "That never happened."
- Attack: "You're mean, crazy, stupid."
- Reverse victim and offender: "I'm the one hurt here; you're the problem."

By running this script, manipulators avoid accountability and shift the blame onto their target. The tactic shields their fragile ego and preserves their control, while also confusing outsiders, who may come to see the target as the abuser. For the target of manipulation, repeated DARVO is devastating: it breeds self-doubt, shame, anxiety, and trauma, until they begin to internalize the false belief that they themselves are the problem.

DARVO is often driven by **projection** (Dexter, 2025), a defence mechanism where the abuser attributes their own flaws to the target. For example: *"I'm not angry, you're angry"* – even when you're being completely reasonable. Projection lets the abuser offload their shame and preserve their self-image, while leaving you doubting yourself.

DARVO is only one of many tactics that twist reality. Some are even more subtle, more socially accepted, and harder to spot. So don't blame yourself if you've been gaslit. Nothing prepares us for this, and it's designed to keep you off balance. But once you know the playbook, it loses its power, as you're able to spot gaslighting when it's happening.

4. Why are you so sensitive

Mary adjusted her glasses and looked across the table. “Did you ever feel like your feelings didn’t matter? Like he brushed them off or called you too sensitive?”

Anna tilted her head slightly, thinking. “Too sensitive…” She gave a small laugh, almost embarrassed. “Yeah, I mean… I am a sensitive person. So it happened a lot.”

Mary leaned forward a little. “How often?”

Anna crossed her arms, gaze drifting to the side. “I wouldn’t say every day…” She paused, tapping her thumb against her sleeve as if counting. “Maybe every week?”

Mary’s eyes widened. A quiet sigh escaped before she caught it. She shut her mouth, looked down at the table for a moment, then back up at Anna. She drew in a slow breath through her nose. “Do you have any examples?”

Anna traced the edge of her diary with her fingertip. “We used to make plans for dinner sometimes. He wanted to be romantic, to do something nice for me.” A faint smile appeared, then faltered. “But he’d forget. A lot.”

Her eyes lowered. “I remember one time… I waited at the restaurant for half an hour. I called him, and he said…” She flipped some pages and read quietly, her tone flat, almost practiced. “‘Come on, it’s just one night. Yeah, I forgot, but why are you acting like it’s the end of the world? Stop making things bigger than they are. I’m just human, people forget. Besides, aren’t you sitting at a fancy restaurant right now? Do you realize there’s people who have it much worse than you? Why are you so sensitive?’”

She paused, then gave a small, uncertain shrug. “It wasn’t the first time. By the sixth, I stopped calling. If he didn’t show up, I just ate alone.” Her voice was quiet and even.

Anna turned another page, eyes moving quickly across the lines. “Hmm… what else…” she murmured. Her elbow rested on the table, cheek against her hand. “Oh, yeah. This one. He had this thing he’d do when we were out with his friends.” She gave a weak laugh. “He’d make little comments about me – my hair if it was messy, or how lame my grades were. They laughed, so I laughed too.”

She paused, glancing down at the open diary. “Once I had a rough day, and it showed. He said, ‘Careful, guys, don’t look her the wrong way. She bites when she’s grumpy!’”

Her laugh came out short and flat. “I told him later it made me uncomfortable, that I’d prefer if he didn’t joke like that.” She read a line, her voice lowering. “He said, ‘Why do you have to take everything so seriously? It was just a joke. Relax. You’re too sensitive.’” Anna’s head stayed propped on her hand. “They all laughed,” she said quietly. “I just sat there.”

Anna flipped another few pages, eyes scanning lazily. “Oh… and this one,” she said, her voice almost absent. “This one was weird.”

She straightened a little. “We were out again – same group, more or less. He started flirting with his friend’s girlfriend. They were laughing, touching, you know… friendly, but it felt off.” She looked down at the page. “He stroked her hair once, even gave her a kiss on both cheeks. Everyone cheered, like it was some big joke. For a moment, they looked like newlyweds.”

Her fingers tapped lightly against the diary. “Later, I asked him if he liked her.” Her tone shifted into quiet imitation. “‘Stop accusing me of flirting. You always blow things out of proportion. Get a grip. Why can’t you be chill like her?’” She looked up, eyes unfocused, and gave a tiny shrug. “That one stayed with me for a while.”

There was a slightly frustrated shake in Mary’s voice. “And you shrugged it off?”

Anna leaned back in her chair, diary opened in front of her. “I can’t say I liked it,” she said quietly. “But then again, I am a very sensitive person. I heard that a lot… That I notice everything, that I’m emotional.” She gave a faint shrug. “I guess that’s a problem I have and will have to work on. I have to learn how to hide my emotions better.”

Mary’s eyes flickered up. Her fingers tapped once against the book, then stilled. She exhaled slowly through her nose. “Yeah, better be a robot,” she muttered. “Since having emotions is apparently a crime.”

Anna blinked, unsure if she’d heard right. “What?”

Mary forced a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

Anna sat up a little. “But it’s true, isn’t it? When you’re emotional, you look childish. Isn’t that what being an adult means – to have your emotions under control?”

Mary looked away, jaw tightening. “I don’t think controlling your emotions is the same as hiding them,” she said quietly. “But it’s very convenient for certain people if you do.”

Anna frowned. “Convenient for who?”

Mary gave a small shake of her head. “Forget it. I’m ranting. Let’s move on to the next question.”

Anna watched her for a moment, brow furrowing. “Mary… you okay?”

Mary didn’t answer right away. She stared down at the book, fingers worrying the corner of a page. “Yeah,” she said finally, her voice softer than before. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Anna leaned in a little. “You don’t look fine.”

Mary drew in a slow breath, eyes flicking up for just a second before dropping again. “It’s nothing. I just…” She stopped, exhaled through her nose, and forced a smile. “Never mind. I’ll tell you later.”

Anna tilted her head. “Tell me what?”

Mary shook her head lightly, still looking at the table. “I need a bit more time to think how to say it. I promise I will. Can we just finish this first?”

Anna studied her for a few seconds, trying to read her face. “You sure?”

Mary nodded, the motion small but firm. “Yeah. I’m okay. Really.” She rubbed her palms together once and steadied her voice. “Let’s just… get through the rest of the questions, and then we’ll talk. Deal?”

Anna gave a faint smile. “Deal. But now I’m definitely curious.”

Minimization – when a wound is always just a scratch

Reality sometimes can’t be denied outright, so manipulators often begin with minimization. This tactic downplays or dismisses someone’s feelings, experiences, or achievements. When paired with harmful comparisons, it makes you feel “not good enough” and slowly eats away at your self-worth (Shelly, 2025). The long-term effect is that the target begins to numb their emotions and silence their gut feeling. Some common lines:

- “You’re being too sensitive”
- “It’s not that big of a deal”
- “It was just a joke”

Not every careless remark is abuse though. People sometimes minimize out of clumsiness, discomfort, or an attempt to comfort. The difference lies in intent and what happens after. For clarity’s sake, here’s how similar behaviours can look very different:

Behaviours	Harmful	Clumsy	Supportive	Healthy boundary
Brushing off	Dismisses or mocks	Light joke	-	-
Validation	None	After protest	Given first	Given first
Adjustment	Doubles down if challenged	Apologizes after protest	Encourages or apologizes if needed	Names limit respectfully
Intent	Shut down	Ease discomfort	Encourage	Balance care with limits

What separates harm from clumsiness and support isn’t the words themselves but the attitude behind them. If feelings are brushed off and the person doubles down, it’s harmful. If they backtrack and try to adjust, it’s just clumsy. But the healthiest attitude is to validate and encourage or respectfully name your limit, depending on the situation.

5. Look at the weather

Mary leaned back, flipping a page in the book. “Has he ever derailed your conversations?”

Anna frowned. “Derailed?” She waited a second. “I don’t know… what exactly do you mean?”

Mary tapped the table lightly, thinking. Her expression changed – a spark of curiosity mixed with something sharper. “Okay, let’s try something.”

Anna tilted her head. “Try what?”

Mary’s tone turned playful. “What did you eat for breakfast today?”

Anna blinked at the sudden shift. “Uh… pancakes.”

“Oh, pancakes!” Mary said brightly, hands gesturing as if presenting a cooking show. “Aren’t they the best? So easy, cheap, and sooo good. Just a bit of whipped cream, some chocolate – heaven.”

Anna smiled, still unsure where this was going. “Sure… pancakes really are ni…”

Mary straightened suddenly, wincing. “Ow! Ugh, my back…”

Anna froze. “What? Are you okay?”

Mary pressed a hand against her side, face scrunched in mock pain. “Ugh, climbing yesterday… I didn’t stretch enough. Getting old sucks.”

Anna half-rose from her chair, alarmed. “Seriously, Mary, what happened? Do you need something?”

Mary waved a hand, still grimacing. “No, no, I’ll live. Just… man, this hurts.” She took a few short breaths, then, without warning, pointed toward the window. “Hey, look at the weather. It’s gorgeous today.”

Anna blinked. “What? But your back…”

“Look.” Mary jabbed her finger again, eyes half-closed as if the light were too bright. “The sun! It’s so bright, look how it shines!”

Anna turned toward the window, completely lost now. “I don’t understand. What’s going on?”

Mary’s expression shifted, the act fading. She lowered her hand slowly and looked back at Anna. “Anna,” she said quietly, “what were we talking about just now?”

Anna’s mouth opened, then closed. “The weather?”

Mary gave a small nod and tapped the open book in front of her.

Anna’s eyes widened. “You… just changed the subject.”

“Exactly.” Mary’s voice was calm again, almost weary. “I just stole your attention and completely derailed our conversation. See how easy it is?”

Anna stared at her, still processing. “I don’t… I don’t understand. Why would you do that?”

Mary rubbed her forehead. “I wanted to show you something. How easy it is to take advantage of trust. You trusted I was serious about my back, right?”

Anna nodded slowly, frowning in confusion. “You scared me, Mary.”

Mary’s face fell. “I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I just…” She paused, searching for the right words. “I wanted you to see how distraction works. How someone can steer a conversation whenever it gets uncomfortable.”

Anna’s confusion deepened. “I don’t get it.”

Mary’s tone grew sharper. “Come on, Anna. Think. Who does that sound like?”

Anna blinked, eyes darting between Mary and the diary. “I don’t know.”

“Really?” Mary leaned forward, voice rising before she caught herself. “You don’t see it?”

Anna shrank back slightly, lips parting but no sound coming out.

Mary’s hands dropped from her face and landed flat on the table. “Please don’t tell me you don’t see it.”

Anna’s mouth opened, but nothing came out.

Mary’s voice cracked. “A certain boyfriend, maybe?”

Still silence.

“Seriously?” Her voice rose again. “You can’t be serious!” She leaned back, exhaling sharply through her nose. “Whyyy…” The word dragged out, half groan, half cry. “I hate this. I hate feeling useless.” She pressed her palms against her eyes. “This is so hard… I don’t know how to do this right.”

Anna flinched slightly.

Mary sat forward again, eyes tired but soft. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. It’s just…” she gestured helplessly toward the book, “…all this manipulative garbage makes me so angry.” She stopped, shaking her head. “I’m not qualified for this. I shouldn’t even be trying. I’m not a therapist. I just… have some experience. And I read a book that explained things I wish I’d known years ago.” She laughed nervously. “That’s all I’ve got. Experience and a few pages of theory. And here I am trying to play a therapist.”

For the first time since the start of the conversation, Anna’s voice carried a hint of frustration. “He wasn’t perfect. No one is. But there’s a reason for his… things.” She looked down at her diary, her fingers smoothing a corner that didn’t need smoothing. “He has a story…”

Diversion – the art of saying everything and nothing at once

Have you ever tried to raise an issue, only to find yourself dragged into a completely different argument or left in silence with no way forward? When someone doesn't want to face a topic because it makes them uncomfortable, they often rely on diversion:

- **Derailing** the conversation (Simon, 2009): Side-stepping accountability by shifting the subject to something completely unrelated. A common variation is *whataboutism*, where the focus is redirected back onto the accuser ("But what about when you…") to deflect scrutiny. The manipulator hijacks the exchange and steers you away from the problem at hand, often without you realizing it.
- **Overloading** the conversation (Lizardo, 2022): Also called *word salad*. A stream of incoherent or circular speech filled with tangents, contradictions, and repetitions. The tactic overwhelms the discussion and exhausts the target until they give up trying to make sense of it, leaving the abuser in control through manufactured chaos.
- **Shutting down** the conversation (Jayne, 2025): Also called *stonewalling* or *the silent treatment*. Withholding communication to punish, control, or manipulate. Unlike a mutual timeout, the silent treatment is one-sided and indefinite, leaving the target confused, anxious, and isolated. Its power lies in making the target feel invisible and destabilized, forcing them to chase reconciliation while the abuser exerts control through absence.

The danger of diversion is that it makes accountability impossible. Whether through distraction, overload, or silence, the original issue is erased until you lose track of what you wanted to address. Over time, this chronic confusion breeds self-doubt and dependence.

6. Everyone has their story

“Luke grew up in a poor and abusive family,” Anna began. “They lived in this big old house they could barely afford. The bills were always late. In winter, he sometimes skipped lunch at school because they couldn’t pay for it.”

Her tone was calm, almost gentle. “His father worked at a bank, but he sacrificed everything for that job. He’d come home late, drunk most nights. When that happened, Luke would walk an hour to the library just to study in peace. If he stayed home, his father would hit him. His mother joked about it all the time. That’s why he learned to fight pain with humour.”

Mary hadn’t moved. Her chin rested on her folded arms, eyes half hidden.

Anna went on. “He was bullied at school too. The teachers picked on him, and the boys gave him hell. Yet at the same time, girls liked him, and he had the best grades in class. Everyone was jealous. They tried to break him down, but he stood up for himself.”

Mary’s breathing was slow and heavy, her face turned slightly away.

“And then there was his girlfriend,” Anna said softly. “He thought she was the love of his life. They were together for years. But she wormed her way into his group of friends and poisoned them against him. She spread lies everywhere. In the end she dumped him without a second thought. That scarred him badly. He says that’s why he holds on so tightly now.”

Her fingers tightened around the edge of her diary. “He just… cares too much, because he never wants to be betrayed like that again.” She bit her lip, then pushed on.

“When I met him, he’d just started a new job,” Anna continued. “He said it was the first good thing in his life. He threw himself into it – worked late, skipped weekends, gave everything he had. His coworkers were jealous of how good he was, but he didn’t care. He was proud his salary was way above average, but he never bragged.”

Anna smiled faintly. “He even made sure I always felt equal. Like, he let me pay for most of our bills, so I wouldn’t feel small beside him.”

Mary’s head sank into her arms.

“Hey,” Anna said after a pause. “Are you still here?”

“Umgh…” Mary’s voice was muffled. “Yes.”

“Did you even listen to it?”

Mary lifted her head slightly, her hair falling into her eyes. “I heard everything. Family, school, girlfriend, work, bills…” Her voice was quiet, worn thin. “Heard it loud and clear.”

Anna’s eyes brightened. “See now? Everyone has their story.”

Mary rubbed her eyes with the heel of her palm. Her gaze stayed fixed on the table. “Do you believe that?”

Anna hesitated. “I… don’t see why I wouldn’t.”

Mary nodded faintly, her mouth barely moving. “I can see a few… contradictions,” she muttered, almost to herself.

Justification – there’s always a bigger excuse

We all make excuses. Running late, forgetting something, explaining real constraints… that’s normal. But justification turns manipulative when it’s used to shift blame and dodge accountability. Instead of clarifying, it becomes a way of rewriting the harm, so it looks reasonable. This tactic is powerful because it not only makes you believe their abuse is normal (Dogdson, 2017), it also trains you to do the work for them – repeating their excuses yourself.

Over time, you may catch yourself echoing the same lines in your head: *“Maybe I am too sensitive, maybe they are trying, maybe this is just how relationships are.”* That’s how justification deepens the trap. It stops being just their excuse. It becomes your own story – why you couldn’t do better, or even why you somehow deserved this treatment. (Cannon, 2021).

Common excuses abusers use to avoid accountability include:

- *“Nobody’s perfect.”*
- *“Others have it worse.”*
- *“I was drunk, tired, stressed…”*
- *“I can’t help it, that’s just who I am.”*
- *“I had a rough childhood / bad day.”*
- *“I didn’t mean any harm.”*
- *“I was just being honest.”*
- *“I did it because I care.”*
- *“Everybody does it.”*

The difference between healthy and manipulative justification is simple: what happens next. Healthy justification may give context, but it’s followed by ownership and real effort to change. Manipulative justification explains everything away – nothing changes, and the target is left feeling guilty, silenced, or dismissed.

7. But not all of them are true

Mary sat a little straighter. “You’re saying he grew up poor,” she said slowly, “but they had a big house and his father worked at a bank. Was he a janitor or something? Where exactly was this house by the way?”

Anna’s voice stayed even. “No, he was a banker. Mom was a doctor. The house was just outside downtown.”

Mary tilted her head. “A banker, a doctor, a big house near downtown… and still poor?”
She gave a short exhale through her nose. “You said they couldn’t even afford school lunches.”

Anna faltered. Her eyes flicked to the side, just for a second. “That’s… what he told me.”

The café had grown quieter as the afternoon faded. Outside, the light had turned pale gold; inside, the warm ceiling lamps were beginning to turn on.

Mary’s tone stayed calm and deliberate. “There’s a pattern I’m noticing,” she said. “Admired and envied. Fragile and strong. The perfect-love-then-betrayal story, I can believe. But people who talk about ‘crazy exes’ all the time usually hide something.”

Anna looked down.

“Having a way-above-average salary but not bragging…” Mary went on. “Did he actually show you his paycheck, or was it just something he said?”

Anna’s face went a little pink. “He… mentioned it sometimes.”

“And the bills?” Mary asked. “You said he let you pay most of them, so you’d feel equal. What did that look like, exactly?”

“Erm… I covered rent, food, transport.” Anna’s fingers turned a corner of her diary, folding and unfolding it. “He paid when we went out. And for gear. You know, equipment.”

Mary gave a small nod that wasn’t quite agreement. “Oh… just the most expensive things.”

Anna’s blush deepened.

Mary exhaled sharply, rubbing her temple. “Sorry, I don’t buy it.” Her voice carried an edge. “Is he a Schrödinger cat now? Successful and admired, but somehow poor, fragile, betrayed, and a victim at the same time? How does that all add up?”

Anna blinked, caught off guard. “Mary…”

Mary leaned forward, shaking her head. “I’m trying to make sense of this, but it doesn’t add up. You see that, right?”

Anna hesitated, hands folding together on the table. “You’re overthinking it. He just had… complicated circumstances.”

Mary stared at her. “Complicated? Come on, Anna. You can’t have everything both ways.”
She paused, her tone softening just slightly. “Sure, everyone has their story… but not all of

them are true." A sigh escaped her; she pressed her fingers to her forehead for a moment. "Sorry. I'm not trying to attack you. I just… I've heard all this before. This guy sounds like a carbon copy of my sister."

Anna's face tightened. "You're making him sound worse than he is." Then she tilted her head, curiosity breaking through the tension. "What was with your sister?"

Mary hesitated. "Sorry, I didn't mean to derail the conversation."

"No, no," Anna said, leaning in slightly. "You're not derailing. You've been the one listening. I should listen too. What's with your sister?"

Mary crossed her arms, staring at a spot on the table. "I don't speak to her anymore. My sister, I mean." Her voice was even, almost detached. "I was always so confused around her. Nothing I said ever mattered, but I had to drop everything when she needed something. When she renovated her apartment, she guilted me into doing everything. Planning, cleaning, hauling boxes… And if I ever complained, she'd twist it into my fault. Or she'd change the subject. Or go completely quiet. Complaining was off limits."

Anna stayed silent, eyes on her.

Mary's arms slowly loosened, one hand coming up to rub her wrist. "Then my cousin told me the apartment wasn't even bought. It was inherited. My sister told our parents I didn't want to live there anyway because it was a lame location." She laughed once, short and bitter. "The more I asked, the more little lies I found. It broke me."

Her hands opened slightly on the table. "I went to therapy after that. The therapist suggested this book, and when I read it, it all made sense. My sister used people. She shifted roles depending on what she needed. When she wanted pity, she was a victim. When she wanted praise, she was a hero. Nothing was ever her fault."

Mary's voice dropped lower. "Listening to you, Anna, it makes me shiver. It's like a male version of her. The same pattern. I blamed myself for years." She paused, drawing in a slow breath. "Now I don't." She looked at Anna with a tired look. "That's why I can't stand seeing you do it. You are not the problem. You're kind, and strong, and a good friend."
Her eyes softened. "Man… if I could change the way that you see yourself…"

Anna looked away, her eyes wet but steady. "I'm sorry you went through that," she said softly. "To think a sister could treat you that way…" She paused, then looked back at Mary. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Mary gave a faint, weary smile and lifted a hand in protest. "Hey," she said gently, pointing a finger – half scold, half plea. "Don't change the subject."

Anna's eyes met hers, wide and full of pain. "I don't mean to," she murmured. "I just…" Her gaze dropped again, unfocused on the table. "I'm scared. I don't want to talk about myself. Not now."

Mary's face softened. She nodded slowly, her voice quiet. "I understand. You don't have to."

Anna hesitated, her lower lip trembling slightly before she steadied it. "But you… there was pain in your voice," she said. "Wasn't there?"

Mary blinked, surprised by the gentleness in Anna's tone. "Oh boy," she said with a small, tired laugh. "Do you have the energy for that? It's not a fun story."

Anna's eyes brightened through the tears. "So what if it's not fun? It's your story."
She leaned forward just a little, searching Mary's face. "I want to hear it. Go ahead. I'll listen."

Lying – when truth is seen as a weakness

Have you ever felt like you had to play detective in your own relationship? Retracing conversations, checking old messages, trying to piece together what really happened… That usually isn't paranoia. It's a sign that honesty was never on the table.

When relationships are treated like a game and the goal is to feed the ego, lying becomes a strategy. Why tell the truth if it only puts you at a disadvantage?

Emotional manipulators use lies to protect a fragile ego and avoid shame. Deception helps them control others, protect their image, and escape responsibility for their actions. Often, their lies are laced with just enough truth to sound convincing, which makes them especially difficult to spot. Still, there are patterns you can look for (Dyar, 2025):

- **Contradictions** – Inconsistencies that don't add up, sometimes even casting themselves as both the victim and the hero.
- **Excessive defensiveness** – Even small or neutral questions can trigger hostility. Instead of calmly clarifying, they lash out and accuse you of mistrust.
- **Blame-shifting** – They dodge accountability by flipping the accusation back on you, forcing you to defend yourself instead of holding them responsible.
- **Emotional mismatch** – Their words don't align with their tone or body language. They might laugh while apologizing, sound flat while describing something serious, or act overly dramatic when insisting on innocence. That mismatch often leaves you with a gut-level sense that something is off.

The power of lying isn't just in what's said, but in what it forces you to do. It pushes you into a defensive posture, always second-guessing and trying to cross-check. Over time, this erodes trust in your own memory and instincts. That's the ultimate effect: you stop relying on your gut and start relying on the manipulator's version of reality instead.

PART III. CRUSHING YOUR SENSE OF WORTH

8. How can you be so ungrateful?

Mary slumped back in her chair, arms crossed tight. “Ugh… Family.” She gave a small, bitter laugh. “Isn’t it stupid how something you have absolutely no control over decides your whole life? I’m so mad. Even after all that therapy, I still catch myself chasing approval. My whole character… to think it’s been defined by her.” She stared at the tabletop.

Anna leaned forward. “I don’t think your sister made you any worse,” she said gently. “You’re… well, you. I doubt your sister has those fun quirks you have.”

Mary scoffed, her words speeding up. “Yeah, I’m me, and I have to force myself not to be a doormat. It’s so damn hard. It would be so much easier if I just didn’t care what people think. Reprogramming your own head… it’s exhausting.” She paused, now playing with her hair strand. “It actually goes back to childhood. It was a nightmare going to the same school as her.”

Anna stayed quiet.

“I still remember this one morning,” Mary continued. “Cold autumn, breath showing in the air. I didn’t want to lend her my sweater. She had a plain black one, and I had this ridiculous fluffy red one. The kind grandmothers wear.” She smirked briefly. “She goes, ‘I’m cold, lend me yours.’ But she wasn’t even dressed worse than me. She had that fancy thermal gear from her running competitions. I didn’t. So I said no.”

Her tone shifted, mimicking: “‘Oh my god, after everything I do for you? You hoard all the cute things for yourself? I lent you a pencil, remember? And you can’t even help your sister when she’s cold?’”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Of course I remembered. It was my pencil she gave back to me. Then she started about that makeup kit she gave me for my birthday. I never asked for it. Barely touched it. Guess who actually used it?”

Anna let out a soft laugh. “She bought a gift for herself?”

Mary lifted a hand as if waving the last story aside. “Oh, that was actually nothing compared to this. I bought headphones with pocket money I’d saved for a year.” Her voice quickened. “Didn’t even get to use them much. Every time she saw me with music on, she’d start talking, expecting me to stop and listen to her rambling.”

Her hand landed on the table with a soft tap. “Always that same speech… How I should be a good sister, how I should share my things. And then…” she took a breath, her voice pitching lower, mocking – “‘How can you be so ungrateful?’”

Mary’s words spilled out again. “The last rant I remember went like, ‘I told Mom you helped me clean the room, even though you barely did anything. I cover for you, and this is how you repay me?’ I was furious, because it was actually me who cleaned while she just lay there pretending to help.” She shook her head, rolling her eyes. “Couldn’t even change the sheets without her complaining. Later, the headphones just… mysteriously disappeared.”

Anna's eyes lit up. "Oh, I just got an idea for a birthday present."

Mary's mouth curved into a tired smile. "Eh? Oh… it's OK. It's been so long." She glanced toward the window. "I only remember it because we talked about it in therapy. You wouldn't believe how much came up in those sessions. It's like a massive iceberg." She paused, then added quietly, "And I'm some kind of Titanic."

For a moment neither spoke. The sounds of customers chatting pressed in between them.

"Guess you really can't choose your family," Mary murmured with a hint of a smile tugging at her lip.

Guilt tripping – when kindness comes with an expensive bill

When someone offers you a favour, do you ever get a weird feeling they will use it against you? You might have been guilt tripped in the past. There's nothing wrong with doing favours – or refusing to do them. But whether you asked for it or not, when a favour is later used to pressure you into compliance, that's emotional blackmail. Kindness should never come with a bill.

Guilt tripping can come from either insecurity or manipulation (Margolies, 2021). Sometimes it's unconscious: a person feels anxious or afraid of being forgotten, and instead of voicing that need directly, they project it onto you. Your boundary is misread as rejection, their disappointment becomes your fault, and you're pressured to make up for feelings you didn't cause. For example, a mom calls her daughter late on a Sunday. She refuses to come by for dinner because of work and her mom sighs, "*Oh, I guess you're too busy for me now.*"

Other times, guilt-tripping is deliberate and entitled: love and care are turned into debts, and every gift or favour becomes leverage. The most common example is "*How can you be so ungrateful after all I've done for you*", but there are many variations (Lee, 2024b):

- Blaming you for things you didn't do – "*You always put me last on your priority list.*"
- Flipping the script – "*I had no choice but to steal from you, because you didn't see how much I needed it.*"
- Not letting something go – "*Remember that one time when you…*"
- Ascribing ill intent – "*You're trying to make me feel bad."*
- Playing the victim – "*Look how badly everyone has treated me.*"
- One-upping your misfortune – "*You think you have it bad? My situation is even worse.*"
- The silent treatment – cutting you off without explanation and leaving you to wonder what you did wrong.

You might notice overlap with other tactics, because it's impossible to neatly sort every manipulative behaviour into a single box. What unites them here is the aim: to make you feel **guilty** for not meeting their demands or for standing up for yourself.

You probably aren't ungrateful. Gratitude is a choice, not a debt. Care never comes with strings attached. If someone used kindness to control you, they never cared about you.

9. You are such a [insert label]

"You know those memories you just… erase?" Mary tilted her head, searching for the right word. "Like they were never even there."

Anna shrugged. "Would love to know! But if my brain erased them, how would I even know they exist?"

Mary almost shouted "Exactly!" She spread her arms, palms up. "I completely forgot I used to play volleyball! My therapist asked if there was ever something that made me feel both excited and nervous. I said no, and then – bam – it hit me. Volleyball. I used to spend whole afternoons playing."

Her hands came together as if she were holding an invisible ball. "We figured I must've buried those memories for a reason. Something bad must have happened. I can't believe I just… erased it."

Anna tilted her head. "But isn't that almost like… a part of you died? If you just forget something important…"

Mary pointed at her. "Oh my god! I couldn't have put it into words any better, Anna! A part of you dying. That's exactly it." Her voice rose, bright for a second, then softened. "When I realized I'd lost those memories, I cried. Didn't even know why at first. Then it clicked, and I got angry. Really angry. My therapist actually looked worried."

She gave a short, shaky laugh and rubbed her hands together as if trying to shake off the memory. "We found out what made me bury it. My sister used to play volleyball with my group too. It was like drilling into my own brain, but we got through all the memories and now I remember everything like it was yesterday."

Mary leaned forward, her fingers already moving as if setting an invisible ball. "Every time my serve missed, she had some comment. 'Here comes the best server in the baby league. The flat-handed lady strikes again. If only your hands were as strong as your butt.'" She gave a breathy, disbelieving laugh. "I was *so lovingly* called benchwarmer, miss grandpa-aim, balloon butt baby… None of it was even clever. Every lost point somehow turned into my fault, even when the ball hit the ground on the opposite side of the court."

Her rhythm quickened. "Then I remembered my last match. It was so close – we were at twenty-two, they were at twenty-three. Their serve curved around my teammate; she couldn't reach it. Twenty-four. Next rally just kept going. Pass, pass, shot, block, pass, pass, shot, block… I can almost hear it. One ball slipped past our block; I dove, hit the floor, barely saved it. The others managed to punch it back over while they were already celebrating. We just needed one point to even the score."

Mary lifted one knee, tracing a finger down the dried scar she still remembered. "Blood was running down my knees; my elbows were numb. My sister laughed, said I always had to injure myself at the best part. I wrapped my shirt around my knee and went back in. Next point, they

tipped the ball over the block, right at me." She inhaled through her teeth. "It landed beside my feet."

Her voice broke slightly. "We lost. And I'd somehow erased all of it from my memory. Her words came back so clearly when I remembered: *'Nice job letting the ball drop beside your feet. The enemies already have a full team, they don't need your help. You're only good at warming the bench, why didn't you just stay there? And now you're bleeding all over the field. Will you clean that up?'"*

Mary looked away, shaking her head. "When I pushed back, she said I couldn't even take a joke. Everything went black for a moment. I hated volleyball after that. Never touched a ball again."

Anna blinked slowly, eyes caught between pity and disbelief. "God… that's cruel. I don't know how you put up with it."

Mary gave a small, almost embarrassed laugh. "Yeah… I can't believe I looked up to her."

Anna's head jerked up. "Wait… You looked up to her?"

Mary's eyes unfocused, her voice dropping to a murmur. "Yeah. I loved my sister." She hesitated, searching for something she could barely name. "Looking back, I was kind of… addicted."

Anna frowned slightly, not out of judgment but confusion.

Mary met her gaze again, eyes narrowing in thought. "You know how people get hooked on slot machines?"

Humiliation – when contempt wears a smile

Has someone ever turned mean on you out of nowhere, leaving you stunned and small? That may have been a humiliation tactic. Humiliation is a power play — a systematic attempt to strip you of dignity and convince you that you are worthless.

Narcissistic humiliation (Bliss, 2024) comes from deep insecurity and fear of inadequacy. Instead of facing those feelings, narcissists degrade others to elevate themselves. It's a smokescreen: your "flaws" are put under the spotlight so theirs stay hidden. It's also a way to find out what hurts you.

Some common examples include:

- Public shaming – Belittling in front of others for maximum sting. *Example: "Yeah, you're really awkward with your social skills."*
- Domination contests – Turning every interaction into proof of superiority. *Example: correcting your every word in front of friends just to "show off."*

- Insults and mocking in general – Open contempt designed to crush self-worth. *Example: Laughing at you when you fall.*
- Mocking interests and preferences – Belittling the things that bring you joy. *Example: "You still play video games? That's so childish."*
- Highlighting flaws and failures – Drawing attention to mistakes and exaggerating them. *Example: "Remember when you dropped the ball last season? You always do that."*
- Sarcasm and cruel jokes – Disguising contempt as humour. *Example: "Relax, it was just a joke. Can't help it if you're too sensitive."*

These tactics might seem small in isolation, but their impact is anything but. Constant humiliation using demeaning comments, labelling, fault-finding, and put downs disguised as jokes erodes self-worth until you start doubting your own value. Over time, it can lead to anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, but the main effect is a strong sense of **shame** for being yourself.

If this happened to you, remember: those attacks were never about you. Humiliation is a mirror of the abuser's insecurity, not proof of your flaws.

You are not what they said you were.

10. I loved those moments. They made me feel… Warm. Fuzzy. Even dizzy at times.

Anna scratched her head. “Eh… I don’t go to casinos. You know, the house always wins.” She frowned. “What do you even mean by that?”

Mary’s lips curved into a small, knowing smile. “And you cracked the code. The only way to win is not to play.” She spread her hands, palms up, like offering the thought for inspection. “That’s what I finally understood after reading that book. My sister got me hooked on her – not gambling, but on *her*. I still don’t know if she meant to, but it worked the same way it does in casinos.”

Anna blinked. “How does that even happen? You’re not making any sense.”

Mary leaned back, eyes narrowing slightly as she searched for the right words. “In a casino, the wins are rare. You lose just enough to stay frustrated, but every now and then you get that one lucky spin that makes you feel alive again. You tell yourself you’re close to turning things around. That’s how she kept me coming back.”

“Huh?”

“Wait, I’ll explain,” Mary said, her voice gentler now. “There were times I actually enjoyed being around her. She’d invite me to hang out with her friends, tell me secrets about boys in her class.” A faint smile tugged at her mouth. “When I studied, she’d tease me for being a nerd, then show me how to do it better. She teased a lot, but sometimes she’d just sit beside me, tell me not to cry, say she loved me, and hug me.”

Her voice drifted, barely above a whisper. “I loved those moments. They made me feel… warm. Fuzzy. Even dizzy sometimes.” She hesitated, rubbing her arm. “That tingly feeling – like little ants running up your skin. I’d want to pull away, but at the same time I’d want to hold on tighter. It was such a weird feeling.”

Mary glanced at Anna, half-smiling, half-lost in thought. “It’s strange, isn’t it? How something can feel so safe and so wrong at the same time.”

Anna suddenly sat upright, eyes wide. “Wait… no! What? This is so weird!” She half-laughed, half-gasped. “Those feelings you’re describing… that’s exactly what I felt with my boyfriend. Like, literally the same.”

Mary looked at her sharply, surprise flickering only for a moment before something settled behind her eyes. “A knot in my stomach that finally loosened when she softened. Waiting for her reaction like it was oxygen.” She pressed her palms together. “Weak knees, shaking hands, heart racing so hard it felt like it might burst.”

Anna stared, nodding a little too fast. “Yes! That’s… Yeah, that’s exactly it.”

Mary exhaled, calmer now, her tone almost measured. She folded her hands on the table. “See? Not so different. My sister, your boyfriend.” She paused, watching Anna with quiet curiosity. “May I check something else?”

Trauma bonding – when love becomes a nasty addiction

Remember positive reinforcement – when someone rewards you for doing what they want? There's also negative reinforcement – when their criticism or coldness stops only after you comply? Abusers use both. But the most powerful hook is **intermittent reinforcement**. This is the same mechanism that keeps gamblers glued to slot machines. The rewards come randomly, which creates the feeling: *"If I keep trying, the win has to come soon."*

In relationships, it starts with love bombing. Then, over time, the affection becomes unpredictable. You never know when they'll be warm or when they'll withdraw. Just when the fear of losing them peaks, they throw in a sudden burst of affection. The relief floods you with dopamine, creating a high. That unpredictable mix of dread and reward can hook you like a drug (Birch, n.d.).

This is what creates a **trauma bond** – a frightening, dysfunctional **chemical attachment** to an abuser. The emotional abuser alternates between cruelty and kindness, making the target cling to the rare positive moments and magnify their meaning. Those fleeting highs become proof that "the good version of them" is still there, creating false hope.

Two other factors that make trauma bonds especially strong are:

- Power imbalance – when the abuser controls money, housing, status, or social connections, leaving the target dependent.
- High-arousal periods – the constant cycle of fear, relief, and intensity, like being strapped to an emotional roller coaster.

The result is a toxic chemical cocktail in the brain: *dopamine* surges with unpredictable rewards, creating cravings; *oxytocin*, the bonding hormone, is released even in the middle of abusive cycles, strengthening attachment; and *adrenaline* floods the body, heightening the sense of danger and thrill. Instead of weakening the bond, these chemicals make it stronger, turning abuse into something the brain mistakes for love and survival. Signs you may be caught in a trauma bond (Arabi, 2019):

- You know they are abusive, but you can't seem to let go. You obsess over incidents, blame yourself, and let them define your worth.
- You walk on eggshells, desperate to please, but you only get crumbs of affection.
- You feel addicted to them without knowing why. Their approval becomes your source of comfort after abuse.
- You defend them, minimize their bad behaviour, or exaggerate rare positives.
- You believe their fake remorse and false promises of change, clinging to the hope that things will improve.
- You develop self-sabotaging behaviours: self-harm, addictions – just to escape the pain.
- You keep lowering your standards, accepting what you once thought unacceptable.
- You reshape yourself – your personality, appearance, behaviour – to fit their moving goalposts, while they rarely change for you.

If you recognize yourself here, I'm deeply sorry. You were conditioned into an attachment that feels like addiction. That doesn't make you weak, and it doesn't make the abuser special. They exploited a predictable psychological and biochemical loop to hook you.

The good news: trauma bonds can be broken. It starts with awareness. Create distance wherever it's safe and possible – physical, emotional, digital. Surround yourself with steady support from trusted friends and trauma-informed professionals. Expect withdrawal symptoms like cravings, anxiety, even intrusive memories. That's your nervous system recalibrating, not "proof" that this was love.

When the abuser promises change, pause and think critically. Put the pattern on paper: What are the bad moments versus the good? Have promises ever turned into sustained, measurable change? Is this relationship making your life richer or are you slowly losing yourself to meet their constantly moving goalposts? You deserve a healthy relationship: one built on empathy, emotional intimacy, commitment, consistency, balance, shared values, love, care, trust, and respect. Love is much more than just a cocktail of hormones.

11. It's like they smell where it hurts

Mary traced a circle on the table with her fingertip. "You know that feeling you sometimes get about someone, but you bury it so deep you almost forget it's there? If that makes sense?"

Anna noticed a spark in her eyes and leaned back, arms loosely crossed. "Go on…"

Mary's hands came alive as she spoke, carving shapes in the air. "OK, so… even though I both loved my sister and found her unbelievably annoying, I always had this quiet sense that she didn't really respect me. It's only obvious now, looking back. Back then, I brushed it off."

She brushed her shoulder lightly, hesitated, then raised both hands like a teacher explaining a lesson. "I know it sounds strange. How can you love someone who humiliates you and makes you feel guilty? But that's exactly what I did. I told myself, 'She's my sister, it's normal to fight. Maybe if I prove myself, she'll be kinder.'"

Mary's voice became serious. "Therapy helped me see how long I'd been twisting myself around that thought. I could never quite name what was wrong, but one day it felt like I dragged something up from the bottom of my brain." She leaned forward, looking straight into Anna's eyes, and lowering her tone almost to a whisper. "It's like she had this sixth sense for finding what stings. She'd poke right at it, every time." She leaned forward even further. "Sounds familiar?"

Anna gulped and took a sip of her drink.

Mary leaned back, resting her hands on her knees. "For me, it was my appearance. That's where she always aimed. The clothes I wore, the way I walked, my hair… There was always something to mock, especially in front of others." Her voice grew tight. "And I kept fighting back, trying to prove I was normal, that I wasn't what she said I was."

She looked deep into Anna's eyes again, this time from afar. "Does that sound familiar?"

Anna hesitated. "I… guess it does." She swallowed. "Luke did that too. He'd joke about the things I was insecure about. Sometimes I laughed it off, but it stung every time. Still, I wanted to be a good girlfriend. There were good moments too, moments I really loved… and I loved him."

Mary's eyes lit up. "See? That's it!" She leaned forward, her voice rising with energy. "That's how they get you. It's like they smell where it hurts – they find the bruise and press harder. And when you start pulling away, they throw you a breadcrumb. A compliment, an apology, something small that keeps you hoping." She exhaled sharply, shaking her head. "They make their bullshit feel normal, make you feel like you have to prove yourself to them. It's like being on trial all the time."

She took a deep breath, voice steadying again. "It took therapy, and that book, to really name it. Once I did, I stopped talking to her. I broke all contact. Those people… They aren't norm…"

Mary was cut off mid-sentence when a familiar voice broke through the air. “Mary? Is that really you?”

Mary turned her head towards where the voice was coming from. A tall woman stood a few steps away, smiling brightly.

Mary blinked. “Natasha?” She rose halfway from her chair, startled and delighted. “Wow, it’s been forever!”

Anna turned, following her gaze. Natasha’s eyes landed on her, and in an instant, her expression changed. The smile was immediately replaced by a blank stare.

“Oh… Oh. Aren’t you… Luke’s new girlfriend?”

For a heartbeat, none of them moved.

Slow erosion – the quiet death of self

When abusers have earned your trust, blurred your sense of reality, and learned where it hurts, they begin pressing exactly there. The process is slow and deliberate: not to break you all at once, but to drain your strength piece by piece. Over time, the goal is the same: exhaustion, helplessness, and resignation. Why fight if it never makes a difference?

- **Baiting & provocation** (Drescher, 2024b) – a manipulation tactic where narcissistic individuals poke at your sensitivities and deliberately provoke emotional reactions – anger, fear, guilt, or confusion – to gain attention, validation, or control. By triggering those reactions, they shift focus away from their own behaviour, feed on the chaos they create, and reinforce their sense of superiority. The goal is to make you react, so they stay in control while you scramble to explain or defend yourself.
  Example: They accuse you of something false just to make you react and defend yourself, then call you “too emotional”, turning your reaction into the problem.

- **Arguing & blaming** (Carter, 2024) – these aren’t constructive arguments. They’re traps designed to keep you confused, defensive, and off-balance. The manipulator twists facts, shifts blame, interrupts, and feigns outrage to dominate and “win”. Every attempt you make to reason only pulls you deeper into the web of self-doubt. The goal is to make you question your own perspective and chase a resolution that never comes, while they maintain control by staying one step ahead in hostility or denial.
  Example: You point out that they forgot a promise, and instead of acknowledging it, they accuse you of being forgetful, interrupt you, and storm off – leaving you feeling guilty and unsure what really happened.

- **Not taking “no” for an answer** (Cannon, 2023) – abusers cannot tolerate boundaries because “no” threatens their entitlement. When they hear it, they launch a campaign of pressure, guilt, or manipulation until you give in. They demand justifications so they can

argue against them, use insults or emotional attacks to make you defensive, deny reality, slander you to others, or feign kindness to lower your guard. The goal is to make you comply by exhausting your resistance until saying yes feels like relief.
Example: You refuse to lend money. They press for your reasons, mock your "trust issues," then imply you're selfish, and finally soften with "I just thought we were closer than that." By the end, your "no" feels cruel, and compliance feels like peace.

The slow erosion is often intertwined with idealization tactics. Over time, the constant contradictions – warmth and withdrawal, promises and denials – create **cognitive dissonance** (Gaba, 2021). This is the mental tension of holding two opposing beliefs at once: *"They love me"* and *"They're hurting me."*

To reduce that tension, the mind begins protecting the relationship instead of itself. It minimizes, rationalizes, or ignores the pain just to keep the illusion of safety alive. Deep down, the target knows something is wrong. But slowly, the confusion turns into numbness, and the **numbness becomes survival**.

12. It would be a shame if I had to hurt you

Anna's voice cut through the café like a snapped wire. "I'm not discussing my relationships with some crazy ex. I have nothing to say to…"

"Wait, wait, wait," Mary blurted, waving both hands. "Anna, this is Natasha! We went to school together. She's one of the chillest, kindest people I know. She's the one who got me into climbing. We were really close before we lost touch after elementary school." She turned quickly. "Natasha, this is Anna – one of the warmest, quirkiest people you'll ever meet. She'll drop everything to help someone."

Mary's words tangled together, eyes darting between them. "I don't even know what to say, but please don't argue. You're both…"

Anna cut her off. "Don't argue? With *that* woman? She made Luke suffer. She should…"

Natasha's eyebrows shot up. "Oho? *I* made *him* suffer?"

"Girls!" Mary pleaded, pressing her palms together. "Please. People are staring. Anna, please – for my sake, just wait a second. Trust me." She widened her eyes like a puppy begging forgiveness.

Anna sank back in her chair, muttering, "Fine."

Natasha sighed and started to wave goodbye, but Mary jumped up. "Natasha, wait! It's been years – please, join us."

Natasha's tone hardened. "Why would I sit with her?"

"Because," Mary said softly, "you're both good people. And… for old times' sake?"

Natasha hesitated, then sat down. Anna's crossed arms didn't move.

"So," Mary asked carefully, "what brings you here?"

Natasha's smile thinned. "I used to come here all the time with Luke."

The words hung heavy in the air. Mary quickly stepped in. "Ah… right. Yeah. Look, Natasha, I'm sorry. Normally I'd ask how you've been, but maybe we can talk later? Still have the same number?"

Natasha nodded slowly. "Yeah. Haven't changed it."

"Okay, good." Mary exhaled, then glanced between them. "So… about this giant elephant in the room. If I understand correctly, you both know the same Luke?"

"YES," they said together, glaring at each other.

Mary winced. "Ehm… Anna, if I remember, Luke said his ex was crazy, that she destroyed his friend group or something?"

Anna almost growled. "Mary, what are you…"

“And this Natasha,” Mary continued, “is that ex?”

“YES!” Anna snapped. “He showed me pictures, Mary. Explain.”

Mary folded her arms. “I don’t buy it.”

Anna blinked. “What?”

Mary didn’t budge. “I said I don’t buy it. I know Natasha. She was the class star! Everyone loved her because she always made sure no one felt left out. She once got the whole class free entry at the climbing gym.”

Natasha looked down, half smiling at the memory.

Mary went on, warming up. “You should’ve seen it, Anna. She ran around showing the newbies how to get up their first routes, cheered for the ones who were scared, and playfully challenged the strong ones. She filled the whole place with energy. No, I don’t buy it. Someone like that doesn’t just turn into a monster overnight.”

She turned to Natasha. “I want to hear your story. What happened between you and Luke?”

Natasha scoffed softly, shaking her head. “What didn’t happen?” Her tone flattened. “It’s fine now. There’s a restraining order, so he can’t do anything. He used to threaten me…”

Anna folded her arms. “And if I don’t buy *that*?”

Natasha looked from Anna to Mary, then back again, her voice calm but tired. “I don’t know what Luke told you about me – probably not many kind things. And to be honest, I don’t have many nice things to say about him either.” She hesitated, eyes fixed on the table. “To think I once loved someone like that…”

Anna’s expression hardened. “Oh, so *he’s* the disgusting one? Why don’t you prove it?”

“Prove it?” Natasha’s tone was dry. “Sure.” She pulled out her phone and placed it on the table.

Mary frowned. “Natasha? What is that?”

“You need solid proof in court,” Natasha said simply. “It didn’t happen once. I recorded it.”

Mary and Anna exchanged startled looks as Natasha unlocked the phone. “You learn fast,” she said. “You keep proof. It’s the only defence against people like him. I kept the recordings so I wouldn’t forget.”

She adjusted the volume and set the phone in the middle of the table. “Here. Listen.”

A tap. Then the sound of a door slamming.

A man’s voice erupted through the speaker: *“What the hell were you doing outside so late at night? Having fun, aren’t we?”*

Another voice – quieter, trembling: *“We ran out of frozen pizzas. I went to buy some. I’m hungry.”*

The man again, sharper now: *“Don’t play games with me. You were gone more than an hour. Who takes an hour to buy pizza?”*

“It was fifteen minutes.”

“Don’t lie to me! Do it again and I’ll lock you out. You’ll sleep outside. Do you understand? HEY! Do you understand?”

“Please don’t touch me.”

“I’ll touch you however I please. You should be grateful I’m gentle. Some people aren’t. It’d be a shame if I had to hurt you.”

The sound cut off.

The café’s noise had vanished behind the words that still lingered on the phone’s speaker. No one spoke.

Natasha’s fingers hovered over the screen for a moment before she locked it and set the phone aside. Her voice, when it came, was steady but hollow. “You should’ve seen his eyes. That blank stare. He didn’t even blink.”

Mary swallowed, her voice soft. “Natasha…”

But Anna spoke first. “I’m sorry.”

Natasha looked at her. “What?”

Anna’s face had gone pale, her voice flat. “I’m sorry this happened to you. He never did anything like that to me. Not even close.”

Natasha nodded once, as if she’d expected that. “They rarely start that way.”

For a few moments, none of them looked up. They all stared at the table and the reflection of the hanging light above them.

Then Natasha straightened slightly. Her tone was quiet but clear. “Oh, and… didn’t someone mention something about me destroying someone’s friend group?”

Intimidation – weaponizing your survival instinct against you

Fear is one of the most powerful human motivators. It kept our ancestors alive. We no longer run from wolves, but our automatic reactions – fight, flight, freeze, fawn – have not changed. Intimidation is the deliberate use of threat to trigger those responses, most often freeze and fawn. The goal is simple: silence, compliance, and the removal of resistance. Emotional abusers use these tactics to instil fear:

- **Rage** (Drescher, 2025a) – an intense, disproportionate, and often uncontrollable reaction that occurs when an abuser perceives a threat to their self-image or sense of control. It is used to punish and re-establish dominance, and can manifest as explosive rage (screaming, insults, belittling, blaming) or passive rage (silent treatment, sarcasm, withdrawal, passive-aggressive remarks, social exclusion). Common triggers include failures or setbacks that reveal imperfection, criticism or rejection, loss of admiration or attention, and challenges to their authority.

- **Threats** (Greenberg, 2018) – when you refuse to obey or disagree with an abuser, they experience a blow to their fragile self-esteem. To regain dominance and protect their ego, they use threats as a coercive tool. Threats can take the form of vague warnings ("You'll be sorry if you do that"), specific punishments ("If you leave tonight, I'll change the locks"), or threats of physical harm ("If you don't shut up, I'll punch you"). There are also acts of symbolic violence – destroying belongings, punching walls, blocking the exit, driving dangerously, or harming pets – designed to make you feel unsafe and remind you of what they are capable of. Abusers equate noncompliance with humiliation, so they view control through threats as a form of self-protection.

- **Physical violence** (Kjærvik and Bushman, 2021; Greenberg, 2024) – the most overt form of control, where rage and entitlement escalate into direct physical harm. A global meta-analysis of over 120,000 participants found that narcissism is associated with a significant rise in both aggression and violence. Abusers are especially prone to violence when their superiority is questioned or their control is threatened, though aggression can also occur without provocation.
  Those who escalate from verbal to physical abuse often share clear predictors: a history of violence, substance abuse, lack of empathy, and poor impulse control. Verbal degradation and intimidation often serve as tests: if early aggression goes unchallenged, the abuser may progress to shoving, grabbing, or hitting to reassert dominance. Because abusers lack emotional empathy and struggle to stay emotionally connected while angry, they can dehumanize partners in moments of perceived humiliation.
  Physical violence is a deliberate attempt to restore control, a way to punish noncompliance, reclaim superiority, and maintain ownership over the target. In its extreme form, this can culminate in life-threatening violence or drive targets toward self-destruction, as prolonged terror erodes their sense of safety, identity, and will to live.

But here, unlike in emotional or psychological abuse, the line is not blurry. Physical violence leaves marks – on the body, in messages, in witnesses, in police reports. It can be proven.

When abuse crosses into the physical realm, there are systems that can help you. It's no longer about convincing someone that something is wrong; it is wrong, and it is recognized as such.

If you can document what's happening: photos, messages, hospital visits, even a journal of incidents, you begin to reclaim evidence, and with it, power. When journaling, note the date and approximate time, who was present, what happened, and how you felt.

When the mask is completely off, the proof is visible. But you have to act. Do whatever you can to turn your freeze or fawn response into fight or flight. Not metaphorically, but literally: Leave, call, shout, run, reach out, record. Your survival may depend on it.

Physical violence is never normal. The only time it's acceptable is in self-defence. Hurting someone because you felt disrespected, rejected, or ignored is not self-defence. It's abuse, and it's an active choice.

PART IV. CLOSING THE WALLS IN ON YOU

13. It was like something took away their trust

Anna's voice was tight. "He said you poisoned his group of friends against him. That you spread lies and then dumped him."

Natasha gave a sour smile, shaking her head slowly. "Oh… he would say that, wouldn't he?"

Mary leaned forward, brow furrowed. "Natasha, are you okay?"

"No," Natasha said, her jaw tightening. "But it's not exactly a surprise. Something almost identical happened to me when I was with him."

Mary caught the bartender's eye and lifted a hand. "Natasha, want something to drink? It's on me. And if you'd rather not talk about it, that's fine."

Natasha ordered a drink and continued. "Might as well. I see there's some weird story going around. And it's not like it's original. He used to talk plenty about his ex."

Anna blinked. "Wait, you weren't his first?"

Natasha gave a short, humourless laugh. "No, no… he had experience. Believe me. He'd compare me to her all the time. Sometimes he'd even call her while I was there, just to make me squirm. 'You'd better spend more time with me,' he'd say, 'or I might go back to my ex… she wouldn't mind at all.'" She rubbed her temple. "It became a joke that wasn't funny. One minute she was adorable, the next she was an idiot. I never knew what to believe."

Her eyes drifted toward the window. "And those tantrums… any time I wanted to go out with my friends, he'd pick a fight. 'We already made plans, don't betray me again,' he'd say. And we always had plans. Every weekend."

She sighed. "Then came the comments about my friends: that they were lazy drama queens, bad influences, jealous because I had a handsome boyfriend who they wanted for themselves. I brushed it off, but… yeah."

Her words started to quicken. "He really said awful things about them, that they talked behind my back, that they'd leave me once I stopped being useful, that they only kept me around to control me. And I *believed* him! God…" She pressed her palms against her forehead. "Now that I think about it – it all fits. Of course it does."

She let out a choked sound that was half-groan, half-laugh. "Aaaargh! How could I be so stupid?" She dropped her forehead to the table with a dull thud. "How did I not see it?"

Mary and Anna exchanged a glance but stayed silent as Natasha gripped her hair, breathing just slightly unevenly.

For a few moments, Natasha stayed hunched over the table, breathing through her fingers. Then she straightened, eyes red but dry.

“So… my friends,” she began quietly. “They started pulling away. One by one. I didn’t understand it at first. I stopped receiving replies to my texts and calls. I stopped getting invited to nights out. If I got a response, it was cold and short. And when I ran into them on the street…” She let out a shaky breath. “They looked at me like I’d done something unforgivable.”

Anna and Mary sat still, listening.

“It was like something took away their trust,” Natasha said quietly. “Like someone flipped a switch.” She looked at the ceiling, shaking her head. “Now I get it… After everything you’ve told me… After what he used to say about them… I get it. I see it now…”

She looked back down at the table. “It started when he suddenly wanted to hang out with my friends. He’d never shown interest before. But once he did…” She shook her head, half in disbelief. “He must’ve turned them against me…”

Mary reached out, touching her shoulder lightly. “Hey… doesn’t that say more about them than about you?”

Natasha gave a hollow laugh. “I don’t know. When he talked behind their backs to me, it felt… believable. He was so sure of it, so calm about it. And I started to doubt them too, even while I still wanted them in my life. We had fun together, but I think they could tell something was off. They even said I’d changed. That I seemed more reserved.”

For a moment, they were all silent, looking at the table.

Then Anna’s voice broke through the silence, steadier now but still somewhat stern. “How did it end? He said you brutally dumped him. I want to hear your side.”

Natasha met her gaze. “It’s true,” she said evenly. “I dumped him. And yeah – It was brutal.” Her eyes narrowed, something fierce flickering behind them. “However…”

Isolation – when one person becomes your whole world

Who do you turn to when something upsets you? Think of the person you reach out to most often. If you suddenly couldn’t talk to them, would you still have access to steady emotional support, or would you be left on your own?

Being able to lean on different people independently creates a strong support network. But if all your support comes from one circle – one group of people who all know each other – you may be more vulnerable than you realize. Lose that network, and you might lose one of the few things that keeps you grounded during a crisis.

Emotional abusers exploit this vulnerability. They try to pull you deeper into their network and quietly sever the rest, so your sense of safety and belonging depends on them. Here are some of the tactics they use:

- **Triangulation** (Bahou, 2024) – a tactic where the manipulator brings a third party into a conflict or relationship to control perception and maintain superiority. The third person is used to validate the manipulator's version of events, gather sympathy, shift blame, or make the target feel replaceable by comparison – keeping them anxious and competing for approval or affection.
  Example: After a brief argument, the manipulator casually mentions how their ex "still checks in sometimes" and "really understood them." The target feels insecure and starts working harder to regain favour, not realizing the third person is only being used to provoke jealousy and reestablish control.

- **Discouraging outside contact** (Bliss, 2025) – a tactic where the manipulator gradually discourages or undermines contact with others. They rarely forbid communication directly; instead, they plant subtle doubts, create small misunderstandings, make outside relationships feel uncomfortable or unnecessary, and monopolize the target's time.
  Over time, the target withdraws voluntarily, convinced others don't understand or care. With outside support gone, the manipulator gains full control over perception and ensures loyalty through emotional monopoly.
  Example: The manipulator casually suggests that a friend "doesn't seem happy for you lately" and later recounts a distorted story that causes conflict. The target distances themselves, unaware the separation was engineered.

- **Smear campaign** (Drescher, 2024c) – a deliberate effort to destroy the target's reputation and credibility by spreading lies, half-truths, and distorted narratives behind their back. It's a form of large-scale gaslighting, designed to rewrite social reality so the manipulator appears innocent, heroic or the victim while the target is framed as unstable, selfish, or dangerous, and ultimately discredited, isolated, or silenced.
  The manipulator uses this to protect their public façade, maintain power, avoid accountability, seek revenge for perceived rejection, and isolate the target socially. For the target, it feels like social exile: trusted people turn distant and attempts to clarify the truth often backfire. The result is confusion, loss of identity, and profound loneliness – as if reality itself has been rewritten against them, leaving them doubting their own memory, goodness, and worth.
  Example: Friends start pulling away without explanation. Conversations feel colder, trust evaporates, and defending yourself only makes things worse. You feel erased, replaced by a version of you that exists only in someone else's story.

While emotional abusers seek to isolate their targets, they rarely act alone. They recruit helpers and enablers, known as **"flying monkeys"** (Fourie, 2021), a term borrowed from *The Wizard of Oz*, where the witch's henchmen carried out her orders. Flying monkeys act on behalf of the manipulator, spreading lies, enforcing control, and continuing emotional abuse.

They can be friends, family members, or colleagues who become entangled in the abuser's web of drama, deceit, and manipulation. Often, they believe they are helping or staying neutral,

unaware they are enabling abuse. Common motivations include fear of becoming the next target, a weak sense of self that makes them easily influenced, a love of drama, or a strong need to “keep the peace” by defending the manipulator.

The ultimate effect of isolation is quiet dependency: a shrinking world where the abuser becomes the centre of gravity. Without outside perspective, the target starts to doubt their own thoughts and emotions, relying on the manipulator to define what’s true, who’s trustworthy, and even who they are. The result is a kind of emotional captivity: you feel cut off from the world, convinced that leaving means losing the only connection you have left. But the truth is the opposite, as it is reconnection which can restore strength and reality.

14. I thought there was no way out

"I bet he presented it in a very one-sided way," Natasha said, voice low. "I'd wanted to leave for a while. I'd had enough of his tantrums. One night he yelled that I was selfish because I didn't want kids yet. I locked myself in the bathroom and called the police."

She exhaled through her nose. "When they came, he denied everything. The officers said they couldn't do much without proof."

Her hands twisted together on the table. "I didn't sleep for days after that. My head just… wouldn't stop. I thought I was losing it." She rubbed her eyes. "He owned the apartment. I couldn't move out. My family and I don't talk. My friends were gone. He said I didn't need a job, that he'd take care of everything, so I had no savings. He had the passwords to my phone and laptop – 'good couples have nothing to hide,' he said."

A faint, bitter smile. "And there were cameras. For safety. So I think he was watching me."

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "It felt like the walls were closing in. He owned the car, he was wealthy, he had connections with lawyers. I got a hint he could make life very difficult for me. I thought there was no way out."

She went quiet for a moment, staring at the glass the server brought a couple of minutes ago. "I almost broke down completely. I remember… blackness. Just… Nothing. I wanted to disappear."

She blinked, forcing a weak smile. "I don't even know how, but I pulled myself together. Started reading about what to do. Found a helpline. We figured out how to get a restraining order. I started recording our conversations in secret, copying them to a hidden folder whenever I could. When there was enough proof, we acted."

She swallowed. "One night, when he wasn't home, I packed a backpack and two handbags with what I needed most. Took the bus across town."

"He wanted to settle it through couples' therapy," she said, eyes flicking upward, tired. "The people from the helpline said not to. That men like him twist it around easily. In the end, the recordings were enough. He agreed to a restraining order. During that whole process, I stayed in a safehouse. I mean… 'Stayed'… I didn't sleep. Didn't eat. My heart wanted to explode. I was so tired. And I had to somehow assemble myself and start a new life. From nothing."

She looked away. "It's still very much paycheck to paycheck. But at least now I have my own space. My own air." Her shoulders relaxed slightly. "I just need to finish college. Maybe things will get better then."

"Natasha…" Anna's voice cracked. Tears rolled down her cheeks before she could finish. "I'm so… I'm so… I can't…"

Her words broke apart. She stood up suddenly and hugged Natasha.

Mary rose too, arms wrapping around both of them.

Natasha froze for a second, then gave a small, surprised laugh. “Oh… thank you.” Her voice trembled. “I haven’t been hugged in a long time.” She smiled faintly, eyes wet. “It’s okay. Really. I’m used to it. You… you get used to a lot of things.”

She looked at Anna. “Hey… may I ask you something?”

Anna wiped her eyes, still shaking. “What?”

Natasha tilted her head. “How did you escape him?”

Anna cringed, let out a sniffly sigh, and sat back down.

Structural control – when you stop belonging and start being owned

Imagine the person who plays the biggest role in your life. What would happen if they suddenly cut you off, or if you had to leave them? Would the damage be only emotional? Or would survival itself be at risk? Would you have to find a new job overnight, move back in with family, or worry that private information might be used against you? How many months of basic expenses could you cover on your own? Abusers are obsessed with control, and emotional control alone is never enough. Their fragile ego needs your very survival to be dependent on them.

Emotional abusers focus on extrinsic goals such as money, status, and image, rather than intrinsic ones like meaning, growth, or curiosity. They are obsessed with outward symbols of worth and, in a society that equates material success with value, they find both social reinforcement and personal justification to use it as control. Empathetic people with weak boundaries – the most likely targets of abusers – on the other hand, prioritize emotional sincerity over money, which makes them vulnerable to being trapped in dependency.

The most frequent form of control is **material control** (Parkin, 2021), where abusers hide pay, lie about income, restrict access to funds or housing, charge for favours or basic needs, damage valued possessions to assert power, refuse to contribute to expenses while shaming the partner’s spending, and discourage education or career progress to maintain dominance. The difference between healthy sharing of financial responsibilities and material control is mutual respect and freedom: in healthy relationships, resources are shared to support both partners’ autonomy; in abusive ones, resources are withheld or weaponized to restrict it.

Then there’s **surveillance** (NeuroLaunch, 2024), rooted in the abuser’s fear of abandonment. They may engage in digital monitoring – obsessively scanning social media, hacking emails, or installing spyware. They may engage in physical surveillance, showing up unannounced and calling it coincidence when it’s actually stalking. They may recruit mutual friends or relatives as informants to extract information. Some even install recording devices or hidden cameras to maintain a constant sense of observation or hold private messages as leverage.

This constant monitoring creates the feeling of being watched, erodes privacy, and pushes targets into self-censorship, second-guessing ordinary choices, and living in a state of hypervigilance, anxiety, and isolation.

They even use **institutions** (Baker, 2024) to weaponize laws, procedures, and bureaucracy to reassert power. They may file false reports to child protection, initiate custody battles, or threaten involuntary psychiatric evaluations. None of this has anything to do with justice – it's about punishment and humiliation. When they can no longer control the target privately, they seek to control them publicly through courtrooms, HR departments, universities, or hospitals. They often weaponize social expectations of composure so that any emotional response makes the target appear guilty.

In the end, all these forms of control serve one purpose: to erase your sense of autonomy until dependence feels natural and freedom feels dangerous.

PART V. THROWING YOU AWAY

15. I felt like some kind of ghost

“I didn’t escape him. He dumped me,” Anna said quietly. “It was nothing like what you went through, Natasha. I can’t even tell when it started. He just… disappeared. It was like talking to a stranger.”

She leaned on her hand. “We used to text for hours. Then his replies turned into ‘sure’, ‘maybe’, ‘aha’, ‘cool’. When I tried to talk, he’d stare at his phone or just sit there with that blank face. I didn’t know what to do. I suggested trips, he never had time. Tried listening, he wouldn’t talk.”

Her voice thinned. “I even tried… eh, never mind. Nothing worked. He was just gone. I felt like some kind of ghost. Like he was fading in front of me, and I couldn’t do a thing.”

She took a shaky breath. “He dumped me over text. I still have it.” She pulled out her phone, eyes unfocused. “*‘Babe, this isn’t working. I packed your stuff for you. You were fun, but you need to move on.’* Longest text I got in weeks.”

“I moved back with my parents,” she said flatly. “And, yeah… I did what everyone does. Looked at his socials.” Her eyes flicked toward the table. “I know it sounds pathetic. But everyone does it, right? He suddenly started posting all the time. Fancy hotels, spas, smiling with his new girlfriend.” Her voice cracked on *girlfriend*. “They had a fairytale.”

She wiped her nose. “I saw them once. In person. He looked so proud. I’m… happy for him.” Her words stumbled. “She didn’t even talk to me. She just looked… disgusted.” A tear slid down her cheek. “I… I miss him.”

Mary spoke softly. “Are you sure you miss him… or just the idea of him?”

Natasha frowned. “To me, this sounds like a total nightmare.”

Anna’s shoulders slumped. “My head is spinning,” she said quietly. “I’m confused. I don’t even know why I miss him. I see that he wasn’t really… nice. He didn’t treat me well. Things could’ve been better.” She paused, voice barely holding. “But I miss him. He made me feel… special.”

“Anna…,” Mary exhaled.

Natasha’s hand came down on the table, not loud but sharp enough to break the silence. “It’s not okay,” she said. “No one should have to live with this kind of treatment.” She leaned forward slightly. “He probably told you how much he loved you, right? How you were his world? And then he just ends it like that? No explanation, no closure. It’s cruel.”

Mary watched her quietly, fingers tracing the rim of her cup. Natasha exhaled through her nose. “Honestly, you didn’t lose him, Anna. You dodged a bullet. He doesn’t deserve to live in your head rent free.”

Anna nodded faintly, still looking at the table. “Yeah… but you know that feeling when you finally belong? I want it so badly. I want to feel at home again.”

“I get it,” Natasha said while nodding. “I understand. I want that as well. I think we all want it. But we must also be careful to not lose ourselves. We have to stand on our own first. I almost lost myself, but I’m rebuilding. You can too. You don’t need his approval. And he doesn’t deserve to control you. No one deserves to control anyone. Think it through. Think about what YOU need. I believe in you,” she finished with her fist clenched in approval.

She pointed her thumb at Mary. “And if you ever need someone to talk to, she’s got my number.” She tapped the table lightly. “Anyway… it’s late. I actually came here to study, but I see it’s crowded and noisy, so I think I’ll go back home. Anna, it’s been really nice meeting you. I’m sorry you had to go through that. Mary, I’ll call you after exams. Maybe we could go climbing again? I wonder if you still got it. And Anna, come with us. We’ll teach you. You’ll feel every muscle in your body at first, but it gets very fun.”

Mary grinned. “You’re on.”

“Deal,” Anna said softly, managing a small smile.

Natasha slung her bag over her shoulder. “Good. Then it’s settled.” She gave them both a warm look. “See you soon.”

They watched her leave in quiet. Then Anna exhaled slowly. “I never thought I’d meet his ‘crazy ex.’ She’s… actually so cool.”

Mary chuckled under her breath. “I know, right? Climbing attracts good people – and sometimes the worst ones too. The kind who sense kindness and twist it.” Her tone grew thoughtful. “If only what I know now were common knowledge.”

She took a sip of her drink, smiling softly. “Anyway, I’m really glad you came tonight, Anna. You’re finally starting to…”

A voice cut through the café. “Anna?”

Anna turned, already frozen before her eyes even met his.

“Luke?”

Discard – “I don’t want to play with you anymore”

Imagine an entitled kid. What’s their relationship with their favourite toy? Is there even a favourite toy if them getting bored means they find themselves a new one? Emotional abusers’ way of thinking is very similar – to them, you are just a toy, and when they find a new one, they don’t care if you’re left lying on the floor.

The discard phase (Shafir, 2024) is when boredom or frustration reaches its peak or when the abuser loses control over their target. It’s because their ego isn’t getting enough supply, so they withdraw and stab you in the back. Ending the relationship gives them a sense of control. They use tactics such as:

1. **Emotional cutoff** (Drescher, 2025b) – also called *stonewalling* or *the silent treatment* – is the act of shutting down all communication and affection to avoid connection or accountability. It manifests as suddenly becoming cold, refusing to respond, or withdrawing completely.
   A healthy time-out is temporary, transparent, and aimed at calming down before re-engaging in dialogue. Stonewalling, however, is indefinite, dismissive, and used to dominate. It leaves the target in panic, self-doubt, and with a sense of being erased. The silence functions as a threat to belonging, triggering the body's alarm system. The more the target tries to reconnect, the more power the abuser gains by withholding response.

2. **Replacement** (Shafir, 2024) – is not just moving on, but a calculated transition to a new source of supply for the abuser's need for admiration, validation, or usefulness. The replacement serves two goals: first, to restore the abuser's fragile ego by proving they are still desired and important; and second, to publicly invalidate and flaunt in front of the previous partner, turning their loss into a display of superiority.
   Replacement often begins before the previous relationship even ends, as the abuser develops a *wandering eye*, starts flirting, or cultivates emotional intimacy elsewhere while still maintaining appearances. For the target, replacement feels like being erased and replaced in real time.

3. **Character assassination** (Drescher, 2024c) – is a smear campaign on steroids, a deliberate effort to destroy the target's reputation and credibility. It's used to preserve the abuser's façade while discrediting and isolating the victim. They spread false or distorted information, paint themselves as the injured party, and recruit others to reinforce their narrative.
   The goal is to control the social narrative and punish the target for exposing or leaving them. It's revenge disguised as concern: *"I hope they get help; I'm worried about their mental state."*

After all the intensity and false closeness, the sudden silence hits like a void. You replay every moment, convinced you must have done something to cause it, and you keep hoping they'll come back. The pain isn't only from being left but from believing the connection can be restored if you just fix yourself. That hope is what keeps you tied. It's what makes you answer their messages when they suddenly reappear, as if nothing happened.

But remember: their discard says nothing about your worth. It only shows the emptiness inside them. If one day you're their world and the next you're invisible, they never cared to begin with. They just took what they needed and moved on. When a person is obsessed with control, losing it feels unbearable – so when someone stops feeding that need, the only thing left is to discard them and find a new source.

If you ever wonder how someone could erase you so easily, ask yourself this: would you do that to anyone you truly cared about?

16. I can change

“It’s so great to see you, babe.”

Luke slid into the seat where Natasha had been minutes earlier. He grinned. “And who’s this pretty lady you’re sitting with?” His voice was light, smooth, charming even. “Hi, I’m Luke.”

He stretched out a hand toward Mary. She didn’t move. Her arms stayed crossed, eyes steady.

The grin flickered for a second before returning, tighter this time. “Bad day or something?” He turned back to Anna as if the question were rhetorical. “Anyway, Anna… I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately.”

Anna’s lips parted, but no real words came out.

“Anna.” Mary’s voice was low, controlled.

Luke looked between them, still smiling, eyes narrowing just a touch. “What’s up with her?” he said, gesturing at Mary with his thumb. “Bit rude not to say hello, don’t you think?” He leaned back, relaxed again, pretending nothing was off. “Anyway,” he said softly, gaze locking on Anna, “you look amazing.”

“Anna, do you…” Mary tried to interrupt again.

“Anna,” Luke jumped in, lowering his voice like he was about to confess something important. “I need to tell you something.”

He leaned forward, elbows on the table. “I’m sorry I broke up with you. I didn’t mean it. It was… that girl. She lied to me. Said things that weren’t true.” He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “It was just a fling for her. But you… you were real. You’re the only one who ever understood me.”

Anna’s eyes flicked toward him, uncertain.

“Remember how good it was?” His tone brightened, almost playful. “How we talked for hours, how easy it felt? I could just be myself with you.” His hand inched closer on the table. “You wouldn’t just abandon me, would you?”

Mary’s jaw tensed.

“I need you,” he said, words coming faster. “You complete me. Without you, everything’s empty. It hurts. You know what I mean.” He gave a practiced half-smile. “We had it all figured out, didn’t we? The trips, the plans… I know I wasn’t perfect, but… I can change.”

Then, casually, as if nothing had happened: “So… Tuesday at five? Let’s go out. For old time’s sake.”

“Tuesday at five? I’ll see… Maybe…”

“Anna!” Mary’s voice was sharp enough to slice through the noise of the café. “Can you step with me for a moment?”

Luke tilted his head. “Why go anywhere? I don’t mind if you talk. I’ll be quiet.”

Mary didn’t even look at him. “Anna, you know I hate going to the bathroom alone.” Her tone was flat, controlled. “Please come.”

“But…”

“Please,” Mary said again, even firmer. She stood, and Anna followed almost automatically. Inside the small restroom, the music was muffled. Mary turned to her, eyes sharp. “Anna, did you forget everything? What he did to you? To Natasha?”

Anna’s voice cracked. “But he said he’s sorry. He said he’ll change. He seemed… genuine.”

“What about that seemed genuine?”

Anna moaned in protest. “I know he’s not perfect, but I can’t just give up on us. What if this time…”

“Anna.” Mary’s voice broke slightly. “What makes you think this time will be any different? You’ll end up like Natasha. Please, don’t do this.”

Anna’s expression hardened. “Who are you to decide for me? My relationships are my choice. Stop trying to control me.”

She turned toward the door.

Mary reached out and caught her arm – gently, but enough to stop her. She took a breath, forcing herself to stay calm. “Yes, your relationships are your choice,” she said quietly. “You want to go on a date with him? Fine. You want to get back together? That’s completely OK. Your decision.” Mary let go of her grip completely and put her palms together. “But for the sake of our friendship, do one thing. Just say no this time. Tell him you don’t have time. Watch how he reacts. That’s all.”

Anna hesitated, shoulders lowering slightly. “Fine,” she said at last. “It won’t hurt if he has to adapt for once.”

Mary nodded slowly. “Good. Just… pay attention.”

Anna walked back to the table and Mary went to pay the bill, while attentively looking in their direction.

When she returned, Luke was scrolling on his phone like nothing had happened. He looked up with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Did you two have fun in there?” he asked lightly. “What is it with girls and going to the bathroom together? What do you even do in there?”

Anna sat down. Her pulse was loud in her ears. “Luke,” she began carefully, “I don’t have time to go out right now.”

His head tilted. “What do you mean you don’t have time?” He looked confused. “You always had time for me.”

“Not right now,” she repeated.

He leaned forward, eyes narrowing slightly. “Did *she* put you up to this?” He nodded toward the counter where Mary was paying. “I know you have time.”

“I don’t,” Anna said again, voice small but steady.

“And when will you?”

“I don’t know.”

His tone dropped. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

Silence.

“Listen,” he said finally, the smile gone now. “I’ll wait for you until the end of the week. But this is your last chance.”

Anna froze. “My… last chance?”

“You heard me. You wouldn’t throw this away, would you? If you don’t call, you’re abandoning me.” He leaned closer, voice low. “You wouldn’t do that. You’re not that kind of person. You don’t abandon family.”

“Hey, Anna,” Mary’s voice cut in suddenly. She was beside the table, bill in hand. “I paid already. We’re leaving. We have to go. Good day to you, sir.” She lifted both backpacks before Luke could speak. “Come on.”

Anna hesitated.

“Let’s go!” Mary pressed, voice firm but light. “You’ll miss your train. It’s the last one tonight!”

Anna rose and followed, glancing back toward Luke. He was watching them go, expression blank, eyes fixed.

The night air outside was colder than it looked. Their footsteps echoed softly over the dimly lit asphalt.

“There’s my car,” Mary said, pointing toward the end of the lot. Her voice was steady, though her fingers trembled around the keys. “I’ll give you a lift.”

The scrape of shoes on asphalt broke the quiet. “Anna,” a low voice called. Before they could turn, Luke was there. His hand closed around her wrist – too hard to be a greeting.

The sharp sting made Anna jerk back. “Ouch! What are you doing? Don’t grab me like that.”

His smile didn’t match his eyes. “Anna, if I were you, I’d call soon,” he said quietly. “And don’t act like some kind of victim.” His hand loosened and he brushed her hair back. “See? I’m being gentle. You’re beautiful. You need me.”

“Hey!” Mary’s voice was sharp now. “She didn’t give you permission to touch her.”

He turned to her, smirk fading into something colder. “Did I ask for your opinion?”

“If I were you, I would back away,” said Mary. Her voice was just subtly shaking.

He slowly started approaching Mary. “And if I don’t? What will you do, huh?” His tone was mocking, but his eyes had gone flat. “If I were you, I would keep my opinion to myself. You can talk all you want. But you can’t…”

His words cut off in a strangled noise. Next moment, he was down on the pavement, clutching himself, gasping.

“Anna. In the car. Now.”

Anna just stood there, frozen.

“Now,” Mary repeated. She guided her toward the car, hand on her shoulder.

Luke groaned on the pavement, half-lifted his head.

Mary turned back, voice trembling but firm. “I have a dashcam. It records 24/7. What just happened? It’s on tape. All of it. It’s totally clear it’s self-defence. If I were you, I’d walk away. Leave Anna alone. Are we clear?”

Mary got in the car, started the engine, and drove off.

After a few blocks, she pulled over, gripping the wheel so hard her knuckles whitened. She broke down in tears, shaking. “Uaah… this was so scary,” she gasped. “My heart’s still racing. I need a minute.”

Anna stared at her, voice barely a whisper. “Mary… you… you kicked him.”

Mary exhaled shakily, a small, disbelieving smile forming through her wet face. “Yeah,” she said, voice still trembling. “In the nuts.”

Hoovering – here we go again

If you thought being discarded would finally give the target the chance to heal and move on, you'd be wrong. Sometimes, the entitled kid wants to revisit the old toy, play with it again, then throw it away again. The strategy of sucking you back into the relationship is called *hoovering* (Drescher, 2025c), named after the Hoover vacuum cleaner.

Hoovering happens when an abuser's supply elsewhere runs out, or when they need to reassure themselves that they still matter and still have control. They reach back out using charm, guilt, or false vulnerability – a recycled blend of idealization tactics combined with:

- **Fake remorse:** Apologies or promises to change that never hold.
- **Emotional blackmail:** Acting vulnerable or inventing crises or illnesses to evoke guilt.
- **Triangulation:** Using friends or family to relay messages or pressure contact.
- **Pretending nothing happened:** Sending casual texts to erode boundaries and normalize contact.

For the target, it's deeply confusing because it mimics genuine affection and preys on the hope that "maybe they've changed." They haven't. They don't change, because they don't believe they've done anything wrong. Hoovering is all about reclaiming attention, validation, pleasure, and control. It's about using your empathy against you.

Remember what happened last time. Their words may sound new, but the pattern is the same. You deserve peace, not another round of pain.

PART VI. IT DOESN’T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY

17. If you believed in yourself, the world would be a better place

"Come on, Anna! Leg up – nice flag! Reach higher! Don't give up, hold it… now trust your foot. Vamos, andiamo! Yes, that's the top!"

Anna reached the grip, tapped it, and jumped down with a bright laugh. "Natashaaa! I did it!"

"Told you you could. You just have to trust your foot." Natasha held up her hand, and they fist-bumped, both grinning wide.

"Anna," came a concerned voice from below, "if you believed in yourself as much as Natasha believes in you, the world would be a better place."

Anna turned, mock-offended. "Tom, I *believe in myself*."

He chuckled. "Aha, that's what all that *'I can't do this, I can't do this'* was about, right?"

Mary, sitting cross-legged on the mat, joined in. "Ooo… is Tommy trying to be slick?"

Anna rolled her eyes. Natasha was already chalking her hands, scanning the next route.

Tom lifted his hands in defence. "Hey, I'm just saying. She focuses so much on what she can't do, she forgets how far she's come. I know I can sound annoying, but…"

Mary cut him off dryly. "You know you can just say *'I believe in you'* directly, right?"

Tom blushed. "She knows that already."

Anna leaned toward him, grinning. "Tom, I believe in you too."

"Me too," said Mary, deadpan.

"Me too, me too!" Natasha called from the wall. "Believe in what, though? What are we talking about?"

Tom's face turned red. "Uh, I suddenly feel like some overhang practice. Enjoy yourselves, ladies." He waved and walked off to the far side of the gym.

Natasha poked Anna's shoulder. "Come, come, come, I've got a new route!"

"Naaah… my hands hurt. I need a rest."

Mary patted the mat beside her. "Sit down, then. Let's talk. How's it going with Tommy?"

Anna threw herself down on the mat and Natasha sat beside her. "Yeah, spill the beans."

Anna thought for a moment, biting her lip. "Heh… how do I even put it into words? It's like… hm… It's a bit… Boring?"

"Eeeeeeh?"

“No, wait… Hear me out, I can explain,” Anna said, smiling to herself. “It’s a good kind of boring. Calm. That’s the word I was looking for. It might not be for everyone. Some people probably prefer the roller coaster. But, man… I’m happy to be off it.”

Natasha nodded, still catching her breath from the climb. “That sounds… kind of amazing.”

“It is,” Anna said softly. “Now that my head’s clear, I can feel how dizzy I used to be. I actually feel like *myself*.” She laughed quietly. “And damn… when someone respects you… it’s such a good feeling. Did you know that arguments don’t need to be a shouting match? Honestly, I didn’t know that. There are so many things I thought were normal. OK, maybe they are normal for a lot of people… But this aggressive shit shouldn’t be normalized. It’s really not that hard to talk to someone like they’re a human, not a toy,” she furrowed her brows. “Such a contrast… You really see how low your bar used to be.”

Mary lit up. “I’m so happy to hear that. But if he ever starts doing anything weird, just tell me. I’ll have a chat with him,” she frowned and mock kicked the air.

Anna rolled her eyes, smiling and shaking her head. “Tom… he’s not perfect. No one is. But he tries. Really tries. He owns his mistakes. He asks if I’m okay with things. He even worries he’s taking too much of my time.” She looked down at her chalked hands, flexing them. “It’s strange to have someone who wants me to be independent.”

Her eyes drifted toward the climbing wall. “We’re still finding balance. I’ve been reading stuff, trying to slow down before reacting. To get off the autopilot, you know. It’s hard, but worth it. We make time for each other at least twice a week – no phones, just us. We look in each other’s eyes and talk. Complete attention. Sometimes we talk about our day, sometimes books, sometimes… nothing important.”

She tilted her head slightly, voice lowering. “It can actually get pretty exhausting. To really listen… It actually takes the same focus as studying. When I feel myself losing focus, I almost have to pinch myself. My attention span is so bad… And I always forget to tell him how I appreciate him being open, but I’m getting better at it. I’m also getting better at confirming that I understood him correctly. But that really doesn’t work on autopilot.”

She glanced at Mary and Natasha to see if they were still listening. Both of them were quiet and completely immersed. “It’s actually a bit frightening. Saying what’s truly on your mind. Even the stuff that hurts… It’s such a leap of faith. Yeah, scary.

Sometimes, it’s too scary and I have to stop myself. And he always understands. Never makes me feel guilty. He also sometimes needs to stop himself. I’ve seen him cry. I used to think men crying was a sign of weakness. Now I get it. It’s actually those tantrums when a guy doesn’t get what he wants – that’s a weakness. A guy crying when he’s opening up… That’s actually beautiful.

Those talks we have… They can get very emotional. I sometimes get this feeling of intense connection. Like I see the world with his eyes. He said he gets the same feeling. It’s draining. And at the same time, it fills you. I don’t know how to describe it.

I just feel like I can trust him. Once when I was sick, I barfed like an otter. Ugh, it was awful – the smell, the pain… He sat beside me, held my hair up and comforted me. You really get to know who people are when you see how they treat you when you're on the floor.

And by the way, he thinks you two are great friends and always encourages me to spend more time with you. He wants me to have my own independent network, so my world wouldn't collapse if we had a crisis."

Mary bumped Anna's shoulder. "I think you'll do just fine. Just fine." She stood up and walked towards the wall. "This time, I got you, you stupid boulder."

Anna and Natasha cheered so loudly the whole gym could hear them. "Go, Mary, go Mary! Reeeeeach! Hooold oooon! Don't let goooo!"

"Hey, Natasha, what's your dream," suddenly asked Anna.

Natasha passed it forward. "Mary, what's your dream?"

Mary dragged herself up onto a ledge and knelt on it, steadying herself with one hand while shaking out the other. "My dream? To climb this boulder," she said between breaths. "And to buy myself an apartment. Half my salary for rent is too much. I want my own place where I can make coffee, sit by a window overlooking a lush green tree and white mountaintops, and read a good book, or watch something on my computer that makes me think."

She jumped, just barely caught the second-to-last grip, swung her leg to hook her heel, and pulled herself up to the top. Then she jumped down, landing on the mat and rolling beside Anna and Natasha. "See? I'm almost on your level," she said, lying on her back, smiling and out of breath.

Natasha made a smug face. "We'll see about that…"

"And what's your dream, Natasha?"

Natasha lay on her back, eyes on the ceiling. "When I finish college and save up some money, I want to… I've always wanted to visit Japan. I want to see the cherry blossoms, the Sakura trees, and those kind, respectful people bowing beneath them. It's such a fascinating place."

Anna stretched her neck to the side. "Toooom! Heeeey, Toooom!"

He approached, raising a hand to calm her down. "Hey, I'm glad you're having fun, but maybe tone it down a notch?"

"Sorry," the girls said in unison, grinning with puppy eyes. Then Anna asked, "Didn't we talk about traveling, Tom? What do you think about Japan?"

"Oh, Japan? Like, a trip?" He smiled. "I'm up for that. The land of anime, samurai, and cool people is definitely on my bucket list. Are we taking anyone with us?"

"Tom, is it okay if we take Natasha? Natasha, want to come?" Anna said quickly, eyes bright.

Natasha blinked. “Like… when? Just like that? I don’t have the money…”

“Don’t worry, I’ll cover your costs,” Anna said.

Tom nodded. “Yeah, don’t worry. We have enough. Join us, it’ll be fun. We won’t go tomorrow, obviously, but we can start planning. What about you, Mary?”

“Oh, no thanks. I hate flying,” Mary said, waving a hand. “Besides, Tommy deserves some time away from his naughty cousin, doesn’t he?”

Tom rolled his eyes, smirking.

Natasha looked down at the safety mat with a tired but peaceful smile. “Guys… You have no idea how much this means to me. I was alone for a long time. Now I get to hang out with such awesome people. I really appreciate it. If I can travel with you to Japan, that’ll be a dream come true. But honestly… even just sitting here, spending time with you – this already *is* a dream come true. Thank you. Thank you for climbing with me.”

For a moment, the only sound was the music echoing softly through the gym.

Then Mary turned to Anna. “By the way – you haven’t told us your dream yet.”

For a moment, Anna just sat there, tracing a line of chalk on her palm. Then she looked up, eyes glimmering. “I want to learn how to believe in myself.”

Building strong and meaningful connections

Up to now, most of this book has been about spotting, and a little bit about protecting yourself from toxic behaviour. To add a few tactics for protection from Durvasula (2024) and Morningstar (2019): the best way to protect yourself is either **no contact** or **minimal contact**. Simply put, you exclude the manipulative person from your life as if they don't exist or keep contact as minimal as possible. When that's not realistic for practical reasons, you can use **grey rocking**, where you act like a grey rock and don't show any emotion, or **fire walling**, where you act like a computer firewall and don't let sensitive information out or harmful information in. Set healthy boundaries, don't justify, argue, defend or explain your "no," and know which of your needs aren't being met, so others can't exploit those gaps.

Protection is important, but it's only half the story. Just because you've learned to stay away from what's harmful, doesn't mean you'll automatically know how to build something healthy. Real connection doesn't just happen because the wrong people are gone. It needs time, effort, and trust. And trust is much easier to lose than to build.

Relationship advice out there is a mixed bag. Some of it's thoughtful and well-researched, some of it's just confident nonsense dressed up as wisdom. So, take everything with a grain of salt. Including this book of course. Never trust just one source.

Still, one idea you'll see again and again in good relationship writing is this: the strength of a connection isn't measured by how good it feels when everything's easy, but by how safe it feels when things get hard. Or, in simpler terms, "a friend in need is a friend indeed." The good thing about adversity is that it makes people drop their masks. Being there for someone when they need you, and letting them be there for you, is where real trust starts.

So, what actually builds that kind of connection? Here's a quick walk-through of a few key skills that make relationships stronger, deeper, and more genuine.

Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2005): It's a skill, because it can be trained if you're capable of it and actually use it. It's made up of a few parts:

- The ability to recognize your own emotions. For example, that you don't just get angry, but you understand you're angry and why you're angry.
- The ability to regulate your emotions. For example, that you don't just explode but calmly communicate that you find those smelly socks unacceptable.
- The ability to productively steer your emotions. For example, that you use sadness from a heartbreak to learn something new about yourself.
- The ability to recognize the emotions of others (passive empathy). For example, if someone is clearly in pain, you don't misinterpret that as them just being stressed.
- The ability to help regulate others' emotions (applied empathy). For example, that you validate and calm down someone who is in pain.

Talking about the weather is nice and all but being able to understand and regulate both your own emotions and another's connects two emotional worlds. That's a pretty intimate connection, because it connects two people directly, from core to core.

Empathy (Krznaric, 2015): It's the ability to understand, feel, and act on another's emotions. You can train this skill by imagining how the world looks from another's perspective or by being affectionate while respecting their boundaries. You can also train it by pushing against the social barriers to empathy:

- Prejudice: making assumptions about others without first trying to understand them.
- Authority: obeying someone in power without thinking about what that does to others.
- Spatial, temporal, and social distance: caring only about people near us, but not people from elsewhere, outside our social circle, or those who will come after us.
- Denial: closing your eyes when you see someone being hurt.

Martin Buber's philosophy captures empathy beautifully: having an "I–Thou" relationship with others instead of an "I–It" one. "I–It" means you see others as objects. "I–Thou" means you see them as unique beings, equal to yourself.

The most effective way to practice empathy is through open, reciprocal conversation, and by doing something about it when you see someone hurting. But you can also practice it in smaller ways, like watching character-driven dramas that let you step into someone else's shoes.

Manipulative people love to use empathy against their targets. But they're also afraid of it, because it's one of the most powerful antidotes to manipulation. Putting someone in another's shoes can completely change their perspective.

For example, when people first hear about emotional abuse, they often blame the victim – "why didn't they just leave?" But when they understand how abuse actually works from the victim's side, manipulators lose their ability to shift the blame. It's almost the same with fascism – it can only survive if people have an "enemy." The moment they see others as human beings, it falls apart.

Vulnerability (Brown, 2015): Opening your emotional world to another person is like opening your walls to be entered, which is risky and makes you vulnerable to damage from within. And that hurts like hell. So there's a trade-off: if you want to stay safe, you can only connect with others on a surface level. If you want to create a deeper, stronger, and more meaningful connection, you have to gather courage and take a leap of faith.

It's wise to only take a leap of faith like that with someone you really feel you can trust. The real skill lies in discerning who is actually worthy of that trust, and then having the courage to face your fear of being rejected. That takes active effort and practice.

Active listening (Nichols, 2009): Just hearing what someone is saying is one thing. But truly listening to another person is a very active process. It takes focus and energy. To the point that it can get exhausting, so you can't really do it all the time or with everyone. It's about asking good questions and giving:

- Attention: concentrating on the person speaking, setting aside distractions, suspending your own agenda of what you want to say, and interrupting only to encourage them to go on.
- Appreciation: trying to grasp what the speaker is really trying to express, listening for their underlying feelings and not just the literal words, putting yourself in their shoes, and trying to understand their point.
- Affirmation: letting the speaker know you understand by offering small reassurances, paraphrasing, or making opening-up statements ("tell me more") instead of closing-off ones ("I get it, the same thing happened to me").

True listening builds trust fast. It shows you're not just waiting for your turn to talk — you're actually trying to understand. And when someone feels understood, they open up more, which makes the whole exchange real instead of polite.

Clear expression (Mckay, Fanning and Paleg, 2006): Just being aware of your own feelings, needs, and wants isn't enough. If you want the other person to understand them and act on them, you need to know how to clearly express them, so you come across as assertive, not passive or aggressive.

Let's say something is bothering you. This is how to ask for change in an assertive, self-respecting way:

1. Describe the situation that is bothering you as objectively as possible. "You always leave your dirty socks on the floor" is not objective. "I noticed your socks have been on the floor for the last three days" is.
2. Clearly express your feelings about it. For example, say "I don't like the way they smell" instead of "I hate this."
3. Ask for a change in behaviour only, not to change the person's identity, values, desires, motivations, or feelings. For example, "Please try to remember to clean them up" instead of "Why can't you be less messy?"
4. State what you intend to do for yourself if your needs or request aren't met. Not as a threat like "I'll punch you if you don't do it," but as a self-care alternative like "If you forget again, I'll start doing my own laundry separately."

You might have noticed a theme here: good communication is about being **specific**, while vagueness, judging, generalized labels, blaming, digging up old history, making negative comparisons, or using threats are the opposite of clear and fair expression.

Fight for humanity

Have you ever had the experience of looking another in the eyes, saying what was in your heart and being received with understanding, care, acceptance, and returning that back? Wouldn't it be nice if no one ever exploited this very thing connection is made of?

Unfortunately, we don't live in such a world.

We live in a world where connection has largely been replaced by transaction. "I give you protection, you give me obedience. I give you a sense of security, you give me pleasure. I give you what you need to survive, you give me what I want for myself."

Fragile egos have learned to exploit others to gain what they want – always needing more, because someone else's joy feels like their loss. They wear masks, gain trust, make you doubt yourself until you replace your inner compass with theirs, and then discard you when you no longer serve them. To them, people aren't human beings with hopes and feelings, only props for their ego.

We need to fight for humanity. Make the manipulative playbook common knowledge, so it loses its power. Reverse the normalization of abusive behaviours. Systematically equip people with self-worth and empathy, so no will be able to control them and so they won't want to control others. The fight will be won only when "Maybe I am the problem" and "I want to use you" both disappear from the world.

Everyone who cares needs to fight. Because if we don't, our *freedom not to be controlled* will be replaced by their *freedom to control*. Stories are powerful – if you can tell them, do it. If you can build, teach, heal, write, or simply listen, do it, as long as it doesn't harm others. When you see someone struggling, tell them you're there if they need you. When you see someone abusing others, fight for truth and name what's happening. Don't become one of them. Don't numb yourself. Let's leave narcissists and other abusive people with the only thing they truly deserve: each other. And to be forgotten.

Thank you

I know someone who can warm a heart just with the smile on their face and in the next moment shred it to pieces with the deep sadness hiding underneath the smile. There is a reason that sadness exists… A book might not be able to change that, but at least it might help someone else start to believe that maybe they aren't the problem.

Nevertheless, I'm grateful I had the privilege of creating some small moments of connection with four fantastic climbing instructors. Maybe we won't create more, but I'll forever carry those with me. That fleeting feeling of being at home is not something you forget. It's even harder to forget the vast contrast you feel when trust magically disappears. At least now I understand that perverse "magic".

Because of everything that happened, I now have a better idea of how to live safe and still keep an open heart. But it didn't happen by chance. So – to the climbing instructors, and especially the warmest human being I've ever known: Thank you.

Gut feeling checklist: the manipulation playbook decoded

Have you ever said something hurt you, and heard back *"You're too sensitive – it was just a joke"?* This is a tactic emotional abusers use to assert control over others by instilling shame.

They first earn your trust, then slowly erode your self-worth until two things happen: 1. Your trust in *yourself* becomes weaker than your trust in *them*, so you start **depending on their approval** when making decisions. 2. Your care gets turned against you: you start equating boundaries with hurting others, and because you don't want to hurt anyone, you **blame yourself instead of setting boundaries** when something feels wrong. Once they get bored or extract everything they find "valuable" about you, they throw you away like a used toy.

Manipulation is about turning your strengths into traps. Once you understand their tactics and start trusting your gut again, no manipulation can reach you – whether it comes from a boss, colleague, family member, partner, or friend.

1. **IDEALIZATION** – creating an illusion of mutual trust to bypass your natural defences.

a. **Love bombing**: Overwhelming you with intense and frequent affection, attention, or gifts to make you feel special and lower your guard, and to create leverage for later demands.
Gut feeling check: Affection feels intense but vague, you start feeling pressure to live up to it.

b. **Mirroring**: Copying your interests, values, and emotions to create instant similarity and trust, so you share your vulnerabilities, which they can later use for control.
Gut feeling check: They seem "just like you" almost immediately – same tastes, same worldview, same dreams. It feels like talking to a reflection, not another person.

c. **Positive reinforcement**: Giving praise, affection or rewards only when you behave the way they want, as a way to train you into compliance.
Gut feeling check: Approval or rewards appear only when you act as they like and disappear when you assert yourself. You start monitoring your behaviour to keep the peace.

d. **Future faking**: Making big promises about what's coming (a promotion, a project, a family…) to keep you hopeful and loyal, without ever following through.
Gut feeling check: From all the big promises, only small gestures occasionally materialize.

e. **Boundary pushing**: Moving faster than you're ready for or testing limits until saying *no* feels uncomfortable to normalize control and make refusal feel uncomfortable.
Gut feeling check: Each request is small, but over time, your comfort zone shrinks. When you do say no, they act hurt or confused instead of respectful.

Is someone genuinely being kind or are they just trying to create an illusion of trust? Ask yourself: *how hard is it to say no to them* -> if that makes you feel guilty, be on your guard.

2. **DEVALUATION –** systematic offensive on your reality, self-worth, support network and independence to control you and make you dependent on their approval.

2A. **ATTACKING YOUR REALITY (GASLIGHTING)**

a. **DARVO**: A tactic where the manipulator denies their actions, attacks or blames you, and makes themselves out as the victim, so you end up feeling like you're the abuser. It turns your attempt to stand up for yourself into "proof" you're the problem. The aim is to destroy your confidence so they can preserve control and hide the truth.
Gut feeling check: You try to set a boundary or bring up something that hurt you, and suddenly you're defending yourself instead. You leave the conversation confused, ashamed, or doubting your memory. You apologize and feel bad for things you didn't do.

b. **Minimization**: Dismissing your emotions or experiences to make you doubt their importance with phrases like *"You're too sensitive"* or *"Others have it worse."* The goal is to shrink your emotional confidence until you stop trusting your gut and start accepting their version of what matters.
Gut feeling check: You replay moments in your head, wondering if you really did overreact. When you share hurt and they mock you instead of listening, you feel smaller each time, until silence feels safer than honesty. You start to think you really are difficult, spoiled, too sensitive, that you can't take a joke...

c. **Diversion**: Shifting the subject, overloading the conversation with contradictions, or shutting down communication completely to avoid accountability.
Gut feeling check: You leave conversations drained, dizzy, and unsure what the argument was even about. You start rehearsing your words before speaking, afraid they'll twist or ignore them. No matter how calmly you explain, the discussion never lands.

d. **Justification**: Using excuses to avoid accountability. Instead of clarifying, it reframes hurtful or irresponsible behaviour as normal, understandable, or even caring. Over time, these excuses sink in until you start repeating them yourself, believing the harm was your fault or something you deserved.
Gut feeling check: You find yourself defending their behaviour to others or to yourself. You hear their excuses echo in your head and feel guilty for being upset. Deep down, you sense that nothing ever changes, but you keep waiting, hoping next time will be different.

e. **Lying**: Manipulators lie to protect their ego, control others, and escape accountability. Their stories mix just enough truth to sound believable, leaving you piecing events together like a detective.
Gut feeling check: You find yourself double-checking conversations and screenshots just to feel sane. Simple questions trigger their hostility, and their explanations never add up. Deep down, you feel that something is off, but you start trusting their words more than yours.

2B. **ATTACKING YOUR EMOTIONAL CORE**

a. **Guilt tripping**: Turning kindness into debt to pressure you into compliance. Sometimes it's unconscious insecurity, but in manipulation it's deliberate. The goal is to weaponize loyalty and generosity to keep you feeling guilty until you give in.
Gut feeling check: You feel uneasy when people do you favours, as if payback is expected. Saying no feels cruel or unfair, so you give in even when you don't want to.

b. **Humiliation**: A power play that uses insults, mockery, and public shaming to make you feel small while masking the abuser's own insecurity. By spotlighting your "flaws" and minimizing your worth, they protect their fragile ego and test what wounds you. The goal is to crush confidence and establish dominance through shame.
Gut feeling check: You feel a flash of shame when they make jokes at your expense. You laugh it off to avoid more ridicule, but part of you shrinks each time. Over time, you stop sharing what matters to you and start believing you really are what their jokes imply.

c. **Trauma bonding**: Randomly cycling between cruelty and kindness to create an addiction-like attachment through intermittent reinforcement. It's the mechanism slot machines use – the rewards are random and they make you think "if I keep playing, I'm bound to get the reward". The power imbalance and unpredictability make you chase relief, and a constant roller coaster of emotions creates a chemical dependence.
Gut feeling check: You know it is harmful, yet you can't let go. You cling to rare good moments and explain away or forget the bad. You walk on eggshells and crave their approval to feel calm. You believe promises of change that never last. Time apart brings anxiety and withdrawal-like symptoms.

d. **Slow erosion**: Gradual, targeted pressure on your vulnerabilities (things that hurt you or matter to you the most) that drains your strength and erodes resistance by provoking, arguing, and ignoring boundaries. The goal is to exhaust you into helplessness, resignation, and numbness.
Gut feeling check: You feel ridiculed for your hobbies, beliefs, ambitions or identity as a whole, so you start hiding it. You feel resigned, as if no amount of explaining or defending ever changes anything. Saying no feels dangerous, and silence starts to feel safer than trying. Deep down you know something is wrong, but you're too drained to fight it.

e. **Intimidation**: Using rage, threats, and physical violence to trigger your automatic survival responses (freeze, fawn) so you stay silent, comply, and stop resisting. The aim is simple: create fear that makes leaving or objecting feel dangerous.
Gut feeling check: You flinch at sudden movements or loud tones. Your chest tightens, breath shortens, and you freeze instead of speaking. Doors slam, walls shake, objects break. You avoid eye contact, stay quiet, and move carefully as if your body has learned that stillness might keep you safe. But you don't really feel safe.

2C. **ATTACKING YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK**

a. **Triangulation**: Bringing a third person into the dynamic to control perception, create competition, or validate the manipulator's version of events. The goal is to make you feel insecure and replaceable while keeping you off-balance and constantly seeking their approval.
Gut feeling check: You notice tension and comparison where there used to be trust. You start competing for attention or validation that once felt effortless, sensing that someone else's name now hangs between you.

b. **Discouraging outside contact**: Gradually undermining or discouraging your relationships with others to make outside support seem distant or unsafe. The goal is to isolate you through subtle doubt and time monopolization until they become your main emotional anchor.
Gut feeling check: Friends start to feel less trustworthy, social plans fade, and you hear small comments that make you question people's intentions. Your world slowly shrinks until one person feels like the only safe option.

c. **Smear campaign**: Spreading lies and distortions behind your back to damage credibility, rewrite social reality, and isolate you from support. The goal is to turn others against you while they appear innocent, heroic or the victim.
Gut feeling check: People you counted on grow distant or act strangely. You sense conversations happening without you, and explaining yourself only seems to make things worse. You feel erased by a false version of yourself that others now believe.

2D. **ATTACKING YOUR INDEPENDENCY**

a. **Material control**: Restricting or taking control over access to money, housing, work, or possessions to create dependency. The manipulator may hide income, control spending, withhold resources, or tie basic needs to obedience so that survival depends on their approval. The goal is to replace mutual support with ownership.
Gut feeling check: You feel anxious about money or basic needs even when you've earned them. You second-guess every purchase or request, permission replaces freedom, and leaving feels impossible because you no longer have the means to stand on your own.

b. **Surveillance**: Monitoring your movements, communications, or social life to maintain control. It can look like tracking devices, constant "check-ins," shared accounts, or people reporting back to them. The aim is to make you feel constantly observed and unsafe to act freely.
Gut feeling check: You feel watched even when you're alone. You start censoring what you say, where you go, and who you meet. Every normal choice feels risky, and you forget how privacy feels.

c. **Institutional abuse**: Using systems like workplaces, courts, or authorities as tools of domination. The manipulator twists rules, files false claims, or exploits bureaucracy and social expectations to discredit, punish, or corner you publicly.

Gut feeling check: You feel trapped by rules meant to protect you. Every attempt to defend yourself backfires, and official processes that should bring justice instead deepen your fear and helplessness.

3. **DISCARD** – withdrawal of connection once you are depleted of value, often followed by attempts to re-initiate the abuse cycle.

a. **Emotional cutoff**: Shutting down all communication and/or affection to punish, control, or erase you. The goal is to make you chase contact for relief while they gain power by withholding it.
Gut feeling check: You feel invisible and desperate to fix what you don't understand. Messages stay unanswered, the air feels cold, attempts to reconnect make you feel smaller.

b. **Replacement**: Moving on before closure and flaunting a new person to restore their ego, prove superiority, and make you feel worthless. The goal is to show how easily you can be replaced and make you question your value.
Gut feeling check: You feel jealous and start wishing what once was would come back. You feel inadequate and disposable, wondering how they moved on so quickly.

c. **Character assassination**: Destroying your reputation through lies and distortions to protect their image and punish you for leaving or exposing them. They twist facts, play the victim, and recruit others to spread their narrative.
Gut feeling check: Friends grow distant, rumours surface, and your truth feels powerless. You feel erased, misunderstood, and alone.

d. **Hoovering**: Reaching back after discard with charm, guilt, or false vulnerability to pull you back into the cycle. The goal is reassuring themselves they still have power over you.
Gut feeling check: You feel a flicker of hope when they reappear – maybe they've changed. Their words sound softer, even apologetic, yet something in your body tightens. A mix of guilt, hope, pity, nostalgia, and fear pulls you back towards them.

Manipulation isn't loud or obvious. It often hides behind care, charm, or concern. Your gut knows before your mind can explain it. Stay connected to your feelings, be discerning with trust, and build strong self-worth and supportive connections. Don't become dependent on others' approval and learn to say "no" without guilt. That way, no one will be able to manipulate you. And if someone has manipulated you in the past, remember: it's not your fault. Manipulation is designed to go unnoticed and slip past even the strongest defences.

Glossary

This glossary is here just as a way to clarify how these key terms are used in this book. ;)

Living with an open heart – vulnerability + applied empathy

Living safe with an open heart – open heart + understanding manipulation + the ability to rely on trustworthy people + the ability to set boundaries without guilt

The heart of connection

1. **Connection mindset** – Approaching relationships as bonds of trust and understanding, where the focus is on mutual care rather than calculation.
2. **Precious moments** – The small, genuine flashes of connection where people drop their masks and share something real, often simple things like a laugh, a look, or a quiet conversation where both feel seen. They can't be forced or faked and are the "units" of real connection, the memories that linger because they remind us we are not alone.
3. **Authenticity** – Showing up as your real self without masks or manipulation. You can be authentic without being vulnerable, for example by being honest but reserved.
4. **Vulnerability** – The willingness to let others see your true feelings or weaknesses, knowing it carries risk but also creates the possibility for real trust and connection. You cannot be vulnerable without being authentic.
5. **Empathy** – The ability to understand another person's perspective and emotions. Empathy acknowledges their humanity and, at minimum, avoids harm. It can be used to protect yourself or to build connection. When this understanding is twisted to control or dominate, it is no longer empathy but manipulation.
6. **Active listening** – A core tool to apply your empathy: Listening with full attention, showing appreciation for what is shared, and affirming by checking back ("Do I understand you correctly?") so the other person knows they are truly heard.
7. **Applied empathy** – Empathy put into action: recognizing another's suffering and responding with care, support, or relief.

Making it safe

1. **Trust** – Confidence that another will act with honesty, reliability, and care.
2. **Self-worth** – The steady sense that your value doesn't depend on pleasing others, being perfect, or meeting someone else's demands. With self-worth, you can set boundaries without guilt and believe you deserve care and respect just as much as anyone else.
3. **(Healthy) emotional boundaries** – The limits that protect your well-being and make trust safe. They rest on knowing your needs, saying no without guilt, respecting others' limits, and holding to them with both clarity and flexibility.
4. **Trustworthy people** – People who will never make you feel guilty for setting boundaries.

5. **Hope** – The belief that something better is possible. While blind hope can be dangerous when it ties you to false promises, grounded hope gives strength in hardship and guides real change. Remember this: never give up on hope!

The threats to safety

1. **Transactional mindset** – Viewing relationships mainly as exchanges of value, where interactions are judged by what each side gives and gets.
2. **Social mask** – A constructed persona used to hide one's true feelings or identity. It can serve as protection from judgment, but it can also be used to manipulate, mislead, or gain advantage.
3. **Manipulation** – Guiding or controlling another person's thoughts, feelings, or actions through hidden influence, often for personal gain.
4. **Emotional abuse** – A persistent pattern of manipulative behaviours.

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